Alexander Jablokov: Wrong Number

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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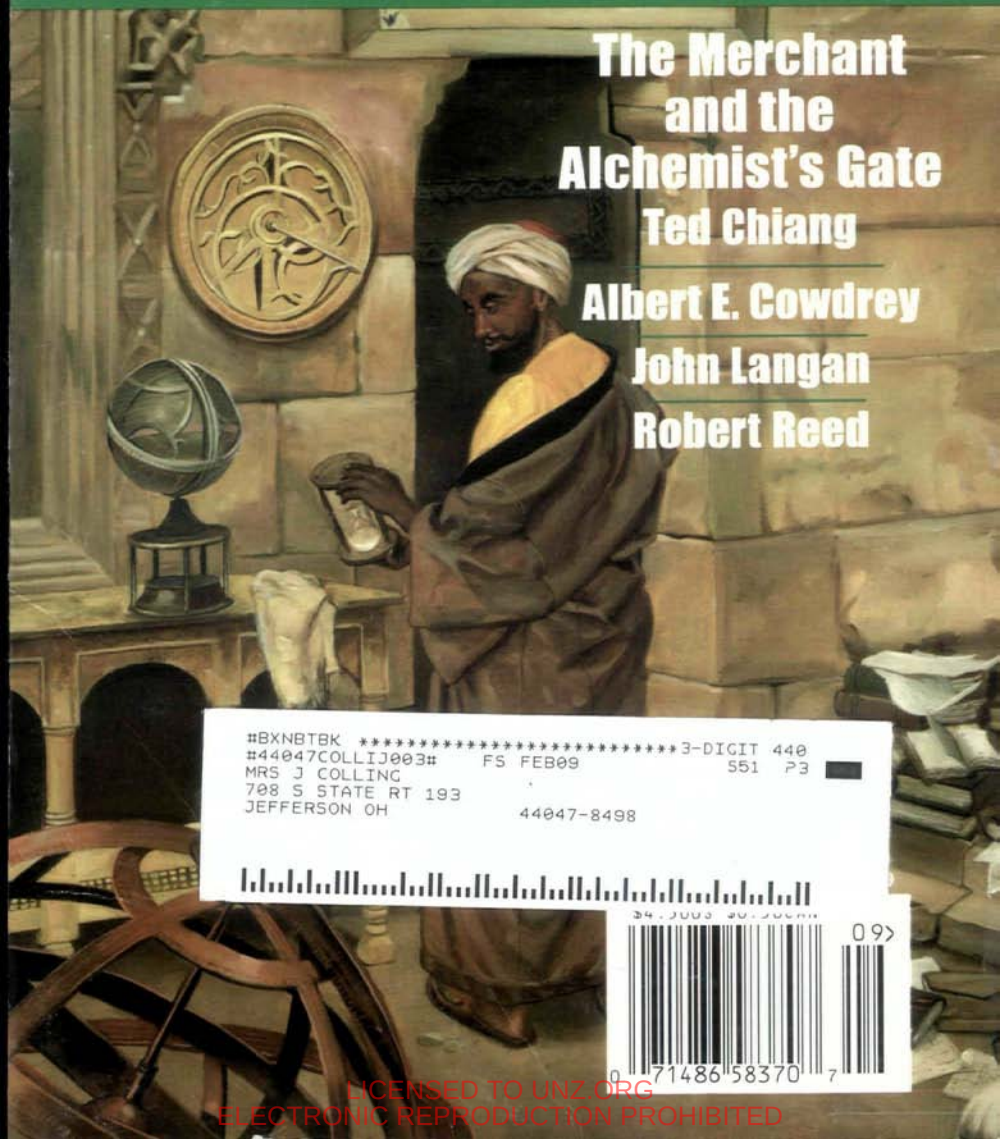

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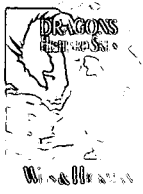

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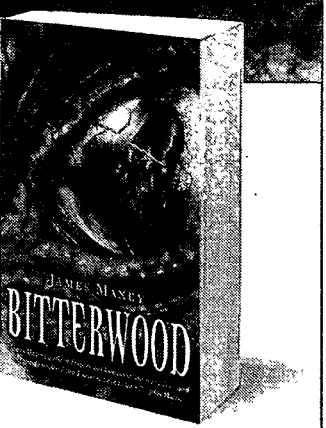

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THE MAGAZINE OF

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September • 58th Year of Publication

NOVELETS

WRONG NUMBER	6	Alexander Jablokov
EPISODE SEVEN: LAST STAND AGAINST THE PACK IN THE KINGDOM OF THE PURPLE FLOWERS	72	John Langan
THE MERCHANT AND THE ALCHEMIST'S GATE	135	Ted Chiang

SHORT STORIES

ENVOY EXTRAORDINARY	43	Albert E. Cowdrey
ATALANTA LOSES AT THE INTERPANTHEONIC TRIVIA BEE	60	Heather Lindsley
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MYTHOLOGY MERIT BADGE	100	Kevin N. Haw
IF WE CAN SAVE JUST ONE CHILD...	108	Robert Reed

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR	31	Charles de Lint
BOOKS	36	James Sallis
FILMS: ONCE WERE MOVIES	103	Lucius Shepard
COMING ATTRACTIONS	126	
SCIENCE: VISIT THE METAVERSE AND CHANGE YOUR MIND	127	Paul Doherty and Pat Murphy
CURIOSITIES	162	Douglas A. Anderson

CARTOONS: S. Harris (30), Joseph Farris (42) Arthur Masear (71).
COVER BY BRYN BARNARD FOR "THE MERCHANT AND THE ALCHEMIST'S GATE"

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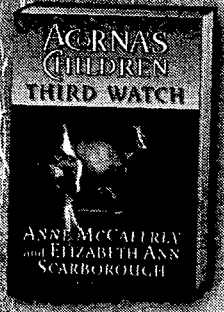

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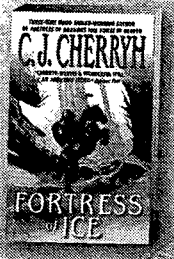

"Elegant and moody writing builds a taut atmosphere of omens and prophecies fulfilled, and ably evokes a magic of will and wishes and light."

—*Locus*

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Regarding this story, Mr. Jablokov says: Once, in an impoverished period, I owned a Subaru GLF that I had bought from a nonimpoverished friend who had abandoned it behind his house after it stopped working. It was an earnest car, a hard-working car, but its upbringing had resulted in many bad habits, among which was a need to visit the local repair shop every couple of months. Bob, of Uncle Russ's, had one piece of advice, which he gave me whenever I brought the car in: "Sell the car." Eventually I did, and then missed my visits. Uncle Russ's is gone, replaced with a crisply efficient Valvoline, and so "Wrong Number" will have to stand as a belated Valentine to that vanished crew.

Wrong Number

By Alexander Jablokov

STEPHANIE FOUND HERSELF wide awake at 2:13 A.M., remembering a phone number. Hers, but with one digit wrong.

She could *see* the thing, rounded numbers on a cocktail napkin with a blue ship's wheel on it, her handwriting. The digit was wrong on purpose.

She hadn't thought of that night since...well, probably since it happened. She'd been working on the campaign of a state rep, and had started talking with some guy vaguely associated with the rep's auto leasing business at the low-key victory party. Decent-looking guy, nice jacket, with, as she remembered, an interest in collecting antique cars. Everyone was in a great mood.

Then he began to seem creepy. Maybe it was the excessive emphasis on the size of the garage he kept his car collection in, or the way he made sure that she could see that the buttons on his jacket sleeve really buttoned, or the fact that along with the sleeve she also observed that he neither trimmed or cleaned his fingernails regularly. Whatever, she lost interest and decided to go home.

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Despite her watch checking and "now, where's my coat?" scan of the rack by the entrance, he didn't catch on, and asked for her phone number. She didn't want to give it to him. He became insistent, in an oddly compelling way. She was there alone, and, at that moment, felt weak. After a moment's hesitation, she wrote down a fake number, changing the fifth digit of the actual number. She'd heard of obsessives working their way through all ten variants of a wrong last digit, but the fifth seemed safe.

And it worked. The feared call never came, and she forgot about the incident.

Until now. But it was more than a memory now, it was a compulsion. She could not stop thinking about it.

Around four, she gave up on trying to get back to sleep, and watched a couple of old episodes of *Law & Order*.

It was like something on a camera lens, showing up in every picture. That number. That wrong number. It seemed like the worst thing she had ever done. Worse than the time she had called her seventh-grade friend Fran, who had a limp, "gimpy," in a failed attempt to get the class queen bee, Mandy Beekman, to like her. Worse, even, than not calling her grandmother Eleanor in the last week before she died, even though it was clear that the kidneys had failed and that was it. When she'd gotten the call from her mother on Monday morning, with the funeral date, she'd implied without actually saying so that she'd had a chat with Gran just a day or two before the end. Nothing really interesting, no great revelations, but it was really nice that she had managed to talk once more to Gran before it was too late...and it was that, that implied — no, real — lie to her mother that stuck with her.

"Quick update," her friend Marlene said. "You've been an incredible troll this past week."

There didn't seem to be a good reply to that, so Stephanie just looked at the dead spider plant that had been on the bookshelf in Marlene's office for at least six months.

"Is it still that stupid thing about the presentation?" Marlene said. "Everyone knows Edith was way out of line on that. Not your fault, and who cares anyway? Nobody even noticed."

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"'Everyone' has been paying a lot of attention to things 'nobody' cares about."

Marlene tossed her blond hair. She'd gotten a short cut last week, seemingly just so she could do that. "Okay, you've uncovered the logical flaw in my argument. You're still a troll."

"I need a drink."

"Brilliant suggestion."

The Cromlech was their high-end Friday after-work bar. None of their usual cronies had been able to make it that week, so Stephanie and Marlene were on their own. They picked seats near a mixed-sex group from some other workplace, away from bathrooms, drink pickup, and dart board, hoping to discourage drive-by sexual suggestions.

As soon as the drinks arrived, Stephanie told Marlene about the phone number.

"Isn't stuff like that just murder?" Marlene sipped her margarita across the salt. "Why do our minds have minds of their own?"

"But it's not like some dumb pop song you can't forget. Somehow...."

"What?"

"More is hanging on it than that."

"Like what? Futility? Mortality? Still no children? Existential meaninglessness? Drooping boobs?"

"They're not drooping!"

"God didn't invent support garments, honey. Madame Olga did. Another reason to doubt."

"Do you ever regret having done something?" Stephanie asked.

"Sure. 'Why did I get the maple walnut? Wouldn't a scoop of the coffee have been a better choice? I don't even like maple, or walnut. What made me think the combination would be better?'"

"You know what I mean!"

Marlene examined her. "Okay, I guess I do. Do you think this guy could have been important to you? Like in a house-and-kids kind of way?"

"That's just it. I don't. He was just a nice-looking guy who turned out to be not so nice."

"Millions of those."

"Exactly. So why am I obsessing about this one?"

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Marlene did not have a quick answer to that, so Stephanie sipped her own drink. Once she tasted the bite of the tequila under the lime juice and Cointreau, she couldn't stop. The Cromlech did not use a flavored corn syrup mix, but delivered something a grownup could drink. She drank steadily until there was nothing but a couple of bits of lime membrane at the bottom of the glass. The bartender, noticing her single-mindedness, had another ready even before she raised her finger.

"Whoa," Marlene said. "You better watch that. Best way to make sure you make decisions that lead to another such pointless discussion some time in the future."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Stephanie suddenly found Marlene's hip-yet-wise attitude intolerable. The second drink tasted even better than the first. She tried to take it slowly, but failed.

"Let me tell you a story." Marlene, who never had a second drink, and wasn't even finished with the first one, ordered another one as well. "Junior year of college I got involved with this guy. Archaeologist. Not my usual line, you understand. You know I like 'em big and stupid. I'll accept complexity in a Cabernet, but never in a man." Seeing Stephanie's impatience, she hurried on. "I guess maybe we all go through our outdoorsy phase, just like we all once liked horses, even if it was just My Little Pony. Spencer had that tang of wood smoke. Specialized in Anasazi stuff, out in the Southwest. Got to go to a lot of pretty places.

"Anyway, he was going away for a semester, to a dig in southern Utah. He wanted me to go with him. I didn't know we'd gotten that serious. I didn't want to go. I had other things on my mind, like getting through school, and wasn't interested in spending four months in a tent somewhere out in the desert, watching him clean dust off some potsherd with a camel's-hair brush.

"It became kind of a big thing, and we had a fight, and he left. He published a few papers about his excavation, I think. My next semester didn't go well. Bad relationship, too much partying, failed a couple of classes. Everything kind of turned to crap, in other words. And I started to think about Spencer, about the clean dry desert, about the wind, about the clear blue sky, and the canyon walls, and the mysterious ruins, and realized how badly I had screwed up. I searched for him and found him, already junior faculty at San Francisco State. I planned a trip up there,

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thought I might surprise him, see if, at least, we could have dinner, and think about maybe fixing up what had gone wrong between us.

"I was packing. I remember that. I had a bunch of clothes in stacks on the bed, and I reached in the back of the closet and pulled out a bag I hadn't used in a long time. I'd forgotten I even had it. It was the perfect size for an overnight bag. I opened it up. Inside was a photograph. It was of me and Spencer at some stupid party, our arms linked, holding drinks, smiling at the camera. Well, he was smiling. My head was gone. Someone — Spencer — had cut it out with scissors, and replaced it with a dog's head."

Stephanie found herself resisting asking what breed of dog. "He called you a bitch?"

"Stephanie, he cut my head off!"

"You must have been devastated."

"I was furious! But relieved. I don't know if I'd ever really believed something would be different if I could see him again, and go sit in the sun somewhere and drink lukewarm water out of Nalgene bottles, but this corked it. But how gracious of him, I realized later, to have made it so clear that that hope was ridiculous, and that I'd made the right choice in the first place. That none of it was my fault. Like salespeople who get nasty with you when you give their product a pass. Kind of lets you off the hook."

"But this is different, Marlene. This is something I'm doing to myself."

"Don't be so sure, girlfriend."

Stephanie stopped herself from ordering another drink, but only by finishing Marlene's second, virtually untouched one.

"What do you mean?"

"You free tomorrow?" Marlene said. "I need to get some body work done on my car."

"I didn't notice anything wrong with your car." They'd driven over in it.

"I guarantee you'll see it tomorrow."

"This looks really recent." The mechanic, a tall blond man with a serious face, knelt and examined Marlene's shattered right taillight.

Stephanie wondered what the mechanic would say if she told him that Marlene had, in fact, backed deliberately into a Dumpster just that morning, after picking Stephanie up.

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"You know I don't like letting things like that go, Jason." Marlene was blithe.

"No, I don't know that."

"Does it tell you anything?"

"It tells me you could work on your driving."

"Really." Marlene arched her back. "Is that all?"

Not having an answer, Jason scratched his head with scarred knuckles. Every once in a while, Marlene got a yen for "someone who works with his hands." The relationships with plumbers, carpenters, and deli counter employees had never worked out well, and the wiring some horny but unlicensed electrician had installed in her bedroom had once set off the smoke alarms in her apartment during a dinner party. The fire crew had taken off with all the carpaccio.

But there was something desperate about Marlene's giddy flirtiness with the somber mechanic that showed the situation was more complicated than the usual predatory approach. While the two of them tested their anxieties on each other, Stephanie took a turn around the dark repair shop. Light had pretty much given up struggling through the wire mesh safety glass of the windows. The tarp-shrouded cars seemed to have been there for generations. Two guys way past retirement age, pointed out by Marlene as Cliff and Gordon, slowly hand polished the one alive-looking car in the place, a blue Alfa Romeo Spider, a sweet little convertible. One man had started out white, the other black, but both were now a general sort of grease-covered gray.

"You missed a spot."

"That's on your side, brother."

"I don't have a side. I'm kind of like overseeing this operation."

"Since when?"

"Since you missed putting fresh tissues in the glove box. They gotta be fresh, every week. You know that."

They both paused, looked over at Jason and Marlene.

"Think he'll ever get tired of this?" Cliff microscopically adjusted the Alfa Romeo's rearview mirror.

"And move on? Who can say?"

"Hey, isn't that kind of your job around here? Predicting things?"

"Sure." Gordon put some more polish on his cloth. "I can predict that

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you better be nice to me, because you'll never get another job, flapping that chamois the way you do."

Stephanie walked back around, past the partition that separated the office from the shop. She wondered if they had a refrigerator in there. She could do with something cold to drink. That damn wrong phone number. She was still thinking about it. If Marlene had brought her here to distract her, it wasn't working.

"I think you'd better go somewhere else," Jason was saying. "I don't think I can handle this."

"It's just a taillight!" Marlene's voice quavered. "Don't you do taillights?"

"You know how I work. You know what I do. Please don't treat it casually."

Stephanie felt something cold on her knuckles and jumped.

"Sorry." It was Cliff, the old white guy, with a Diet Coke. He had hair on his ears, and white hair straggling out from under a PawSox cap. "Did you want regular?"

"No, this is fine, thanks."

"Hey, Jason!" Gordon, the old black guy, lumbered by with a tailpipe on his shoulder. "Help this lady out. You need to actually fix something that will stay fixed."

Jason and Marlene stopped their discussion and looked at Stephanie, Jason pouty-lipped in an oddly aristocratic way, Marlene nearer tears than she usually allowed herself to get. The world seemed full of nothing but romantic disappointment.

"Where are you going with that?" Cliff looked at Gordon.

"It's got to go in the back there. Top shelf."

"Middle shelf. You're making a mess."

"I am not!"

Jason came quietly into the office, sat at the battered steel desk. "You have a problem, then."

"My car is fine."

"Not with your car."

So, just like that, Stephanie found herself sitting down and telling an absolute stranger about the guilt she felt about having given some guy an incorrect phone number. And she didn't even feel like an idiot doing it.

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"What else do you remember?" Now that he'd made his decision, Jason was intent and clinical. "Not about the evening as a whole. Just about writing down the number. About him, about that man. Close your eyes. Let the image come up. Then think about your peripheral vision. It's not as sharp, but sometimes it's surprising what it will catch."

Obediently, Stephanie closed her eyes. She'd been trying desperately not to think about that night, but now she let it come. That place had come to seem like a really unpleasant job, a place you thought about all the time, even when you weren't there, so that it colonized all your available soul, and ruined your Sundays. Scribbles on a paper cocktail napkin decorated with a blue ship's wheel. A bit of table, a paper plate with a smear of frosting. A man's hand....

"I see his cufflink."

"Can you draw it for me?"

"I don't draw very well."

"It's not a contest. Nothing off a matchbook cover. I just need something to go on." He rummaged around on the office's Steelcase desk, searching for a piece of paper that was not already covered with scribbles, and finally came up with an empty paper bag only slightly stained with grease. He smoothed it out and handed Stephanie a ballpoint.

To her surprise, the image that appeared under her hand was a clear and accurate rendering of the oblong crystal of the man's cufflink. She even managed a reflection of the reception room's chandelier, which she had not consciously noticed. Maybe somewhere in those swirls was her own trapped face.

"Wow," she said. "I can't even draw things right in front of me this well."

"It's a symptom. It confirms my suspicions. Don't worry. The symptom is serious, but the cause is curable. Cliffie!"

"What, boss?"

"Can you make me one of these?"

Cliff squinted at the drawing on the white paper bag. "With what? We don't got a lot of cubic zirconium around here, unless you've been getting shipments I haven't been inventorying."

"Just do the best you can with what we got on hand. There's the rearview that broke. It's in the trash, but you can get something off of it."

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"Great. I love wiping mayo and jelly donut off broken glass."

Jason just looked at him and Cliff eventually shambled off.

A few minutes later he was back. He'd taken a square of the mirror-backed glass and glued it to a hose clamp. It didn't look that much like the cufflink, but Jason seemed happy with it.

"Here's what I want you to do," he said. "I'm going to give you a tube of polymer adhesive. When you get home, take the cap off your crankcase, the one the oil goes in. Glue this to the underside of the cap. Let it harden, shouldn't take more than a couple of minutes, then put the cap back on. Make sure it's glued on tight, or it will fall off and screw up your entire engine."

Stephanie waited a couple of seconds, waiting for some explanation that made sense, but it did not seem that one was forthcoming.

"What does this get me?" she said.

"It gets you in an accident. And that gets you back here. Where I can do what I do: work on your car."

"Oh, for God's sake just listen to him, Stephanie." Marlene was sparkly. She'd arranged something, gotten everyone interested. That was what she liked.

"What will it run me?" Stephanie ignored Marlene's gasp at the crude question.

"Nothing in cash." Jason really was a most attractive man, Stephanie thought now. He listened hard when you talked, and his eyes were a nice and unusual dark blue. Clean him up, dress him up, and cheer him up, and he'd be great to be out with somewhere. "But, there will be something...a piece of information, a connection. I don't know what yet. That's what I work for."

But it was no doubt that air of great and secret tragedy that Marlene had really bought into.

"I think I can deal with that," Stephanie said.

What happened to test patterns? There was a time when people went to bed but ponderous electron-spitting tubes at TV stations had to be kept hot all night. Stephanie's dad had many dates for when civilization had passed the knee in the downward curve, and the end of the test pattern was one of them. "Its disappearance marked the end of the era when the TV

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itself would tell you that you were wasting your time," he said. "Though no test pattern I ever saw said explicitly 'you're a miserable loser.'"

Miserable *insomniac* loser. Thanks, Dad. So, instead of a test pattern, Stephanie found herself at three in the morning watching a rerun of a TV movie about...what was it about? A once-famous murder-or-maybe-not in a wealthy suburb. The TV movie came down in favor of murder by the entitled wealthy husband. Stephanie had once wondered who in the world watched TV movies. Now she knew: terminally depressed people. A bigger market than she might have anticipated, it looked like. Hell of a target demographic.

According to Marlene, she'd met Jason when she came in to get a dent taken out of her door and ended up figuring out a way to leave her old job without half a year of misery and poor performance: her usual MO.

"And you think he had something to do with that?" Stephanie was incredulous.

"Well, yes. He makes connections. That's just kind of the way he works. Just relax. It will work out for you."

Stephanie thought about some of the things Jason had said. "What did it cost you?"

"Cost?"

"He said that solving that kind of problem doesn't cost anything. Not in cash. But in — "

"Oh. Well, it was a little odd. I will say that."

"What?" Stephanie was suddenly apprehensive. "What did he want?"

"Nothing gross or intrusive. The name of my imaginary childhood playmate. And the last time I had played with him."

"Him?"

"Sure. Besides my two sisters, all my friends were girls. So Carlo had a role in my young life. Until that day when I saw a Batman comic at school. One of the boys had it. I lost my heart to that dark knight...."

"And Carlo got dumped."

"Like a sack of concrete. So that was what I gave to Jason. An out-of-date imaginary playmate. Not too scary, right?"

"Um, no. Probably not. But weird."

"Unusual maybe." Marlene was oddly insistent. "Not weird. Maybe life would be easier if I went for guys like Jason. You know, the non-lummox

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type. But it doesn't really do anything for me. Plus...oh, jeez, this is going to sound really dumb. Jason's looking for someone. A woman. Someone he was once hooked up with. They broke up...she ran away...it all sounds wretched and melodramatic and book-groupish...anyway, he's still hooked on her, wherever she is."

"I'll let him work on my problem," Stephanie said. "And answer whatever question he has."

"It will be great. He's really got some...magic."

As she remembered that afternoon's conversation, Stephanie reached over the side of the bed and grabbed at the pint of Karamel Sutra. The thing was empty. She scraped at what was left on the lid, then threw herself back on the bed. Ouch. She reached behind her and pulled out an *InStyle* and a *Vogue*, each the size of an organic chemistry text. She'd read and dog-eared them both. That spa in Costa Rica looked great...maybe she could sell everything she owned and go there. Or maybe the nice patterned stockings from Saks would be a more reasonable choice.

She'd gone to sleep just fine, but had again woken with a jerk at a little after two A.M. The husband and the husband's blow-up doll mistress were setting up a perfect murder in the bedroom only...oh, the girlfriend was supposed to be innocent, a dupe. She thought it was for a surprise party. So that was whose now-remaindered memoir the movie was based on.

Well, if she wasn't going to get back to sleep, and wasn't going to enjoy anything tawdry, she was going to get another pint of ice cream at White Hen Pantry. By God.

She pulled out of the apartment complex parking lot —

The car came around the corner with a screech. A big powerful sedan from some other era, wide, flat, and edged, rather than overinflated like modern SUVs. It was some pale color, and flashed across her field of view like a lightning bolt. Stephanie swerved toward the curb, but it was too late. The sedan sideswiped her, making her car rock up onto one pair of wheels, and then was gone, not even slowing down. She stared in shock after its red taillights, then whimpered.

Even a brief moment of thinking she was going to die hadn't gotten her mind off that telephone number. What was she going to do?

The driver's side door was so dented it wouldn't open. She had to climb across the gear shift and out the other door.

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The car was a mess, scraped and pushed in all the way from the front of the rear quarter panel to the headlight which, miraculously, still worked. Then she remembered. Her little afternoon task. Epoxy, a mockup cufflink, an oil cap. She didn't know any more about what was happening to her, but now, at least, she was good and mad.

Thunder rumbled overhead. She'd never had an imaginary friend, male or female. So there was no way Jason was ever going to get that from her.

THE SHOP ENTRANCE came up more quickly than Stephanie expected. She skidded on the wet pavement as she made the turn, and was satisfied to see Jason leap out of the way as she slewed into the bay. She let the water flick off her windshield wipers for a moment before turning off the car. They froze halfway down.

She wrestled with the dented door for a moment, swore, and dove across to the passenger side. She was so mad she banged her head on the top of the door as she jumped out. Jason stood right there, a printed diagram of a car hanging from his hand. Parts of the car were circled and marked with red pen. Looked like an insurance company was about to be charged for some hefty repairs.

"You bastard," she said. "You set that up." A pause when he didn't say anything. "How?"

"'How' is just technique." Jason was calm. Cliff and Gordon sat in the near background, placidly playing cards despite the fact that it was still only midmorning, while a radio played some endlessly rotated '60s song whose name Stephanie had never learned, and that the two old men must have heard for the first time when they were already adults, married with children. Water dripped through the leaky roof and into a line of mismatched buckets. "I could go into how, but it would be distracting."

He slapped the diagram against the wet side of her car, and it stuck. Water seeped through the thin paper. As she watched the ink blossom, she realized that it was a diagram of her car. It showed the damage she had just brought in. What had she gotten herself into? Marlene's answering machine message had cheerily noted the day's wet weather, so she hadn't disappeared or died or anything. Stephanie had yelled her message, in case

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Marlene was in the shower, but there had been no answer, and the machine had eventually cut her off.

"Distracting? I could have been killed."

"Not likely." Jason was dreamy, and a bit sullen. "Not likely at all."

She wished she'd clipped him coming in, but had to be satisfied with the line of wetness her wiper had thrown onto his coverall.

"Did you think I understood what I was agreeing to? That I was signing up to have a car smash into me?"

"Well...yes."

"Well, nothing. That's ridiculous. Do I seem like someone who understands the workings of whatever...magic you play at here? Like someone who can give informed consent to whatever nutty contagion or psychic inertia or whatever the hell is your stock in trade?"

"She's got you there, Jason," Cliff said.

"Yeah." Gordon got up, dug around in a locker and came up with an incongruously fluffy white towel. He draped it over his shoulder. "Hard to keep up the rent and maintenance on the kind of metaphysical freight you charge. Just doesn't translate into, like, bill-paying stuff."

"Maybe if you charged in cash...," Cliff said.

"This is the best job I've ever had." Gordon put a couple of cards down. "Don't want to lose it."

"Do you *work* here?" Cliff, clearly losing, picked Gordon's discards up.

"I'm sorry," Jason said to Stephanie. "I'm sorry. But it's a pretty strong curse."

"Curse?" She felt like someone had just kicked her in the stomach.

"There are more technical terms, but yes, of course. Curse. You angered someone. Someone who had either developed or acquired the power to do you harm by influencing nonphysical states. So he cursed you."

"Your job is uncovering curses?"

"No!" He stepped past Stephanie and knelt by her car, looking carefully at its scraped side. "I'd like nothing better than to just fix cars. That's what I did, for a long time. Fix cars. But, sometimes things would unfix, stop working in ways I could not explain. I realized that I had not adequately defined the boundaries of the problem. Nine-tenths of solving

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any problem is knowing what the boundaries are. Keep that in mind. Your man drives a yellow car."

"Yellow—" She hadn't really seen it, but now the flash of bright color came vividly back. "Yes! How do you know?"

He gestured, and she knelt down and looked, even though it was painful to see what had happened to her car. The metal was buckled and scraped. But, yes, there, deep in the scratches: streaks of gold in the bare metal. Beyond that, the dark blue of buckled paint, so they seemed a gleam of sunlight darting, at the last possible moment of evening, through the clouds that had hovered in the sky the entire day.

That color made it real. A real car had hit her. Driven by — ?

"You made him hit me," she said.

Jason shook his head. "He'd already hit you. I've just processed the damage so that it's a little easier to see. And thus to understand." He frowned and looked more closely at the paint.

"Jesus!" Marlene strode into the shop from the rain outside. "What's up with this weather?"

Her color was high. Her hair was wild from the rain, and it looked like she'd walked for quite some way. Mud had spattered up her calves and caked on the high-heeled sandals that curved their straps around her calves. She wore a bright red dress that looked like it was made out of rubber. Stephanie had run out of the house in dress appropriate for a spring cold snap, in a Fair Isle sweater and wool skirt.

Gordon handed Marlene the towel.

"You're dressed like Polly Pocket," Stephanie said.

Marlene toweled her hair. "You're dressed like my mother."

"Ouch."

Jason quietly stood up from his examination of the dent, grabbed a Makita drill, and slid a wire brush wheel onto it. Everyone watched him put on goggles, step back to the car, spin up the drill, and lower it to the scraped quarter panel.

"Jason!" Gordon stepped forward. "That's the evidence there. The only connection to the accident you're trying to repair. Why are you — ?"

"Yeah, boss." Cliff was equally agitated. "That's just not good business."

Jason jerked back, almost scraping his nose with the wire wheel.

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"None of *your* business, gentlemen. Get back to whatever you were doing."

"Jason." Marlene raised a hand, but, seeing the expression on his face, did not touch Jason's arm. The drill whined to a halt as his finger ceased to press on the trigger. "What's wrong? What do you see there?"

"What did that man look like?" Jason spoke to Stephanie. "The one who cursed you."

"I said as much as I remember. I wasn't paying attention at that point. But I'm still thinking about the telephone number."

"The telephone number...." Jason looked stunned, as if hearing all of it for the first time. "Old cars...cufflink.... Did he...his fingernails...."

"Terrible," Stephanie said. "A horror. I must say, I'm impressed by how nice you keep your hands, Jason. Given what you do for a living."

Jason ignored Stephanie's feeble compliment and looked at Marlene, who stepped back, startled by the intensity of his gaze. "When we met, I was looking for someone. A woman who — "

"You're still looking for her, right? I mean, you haven't told me anything different." Marlene's cheerful mood had vanished.

"That's true."

"So I didn't add in any hope. It's still the same amount."

Jason closed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Gordon leaned over Stephanie's car, ran a finger down the streak of yellow. "That's it. The track. We got him, Cliffie. We got him. The guy she ran off with. Right here." He rubbed his bald head with a large-knuckled hand.

"Amazing," Cliff said. "Great thing about guys like that. They keep trying things, until you find them again."

Gordon grabbed a box from the desk and handed Stephanie a tissue.

A few seconds later, she turned and sneezed. "Does anyone seem particularly happy about that, do you think?"

Gordon shrugged. "Jason's been looking for this guy for a long time. He thinks finding him will solve his problems, get his girl back, all kinds of stuff. Even smart people don't understand anything. Only way the rest of us can get by in this world, I always say."

"That trace on my car is going to let him find his old girlfriend?"

"He thinks so. And he seems to know his business."

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"Buff it out." Stephanie's voice came out harsher than she expected, almost a bark of command.

Gordon and Cliff jumped. "What?"

"Clean out the paint. Then you can pull the dent, put in some Bondo, do your thing, right? Why don't you get started?"

They both looked at Jason.

"Don't listen to her." Marlene was just as peremptory. "Jason. Do what you do."

"Do you...do you mean that?"

"Was this girl someone who would say things she didn't mean?" Marlene shook her head slowly. "That gives me some hope, then, because I always mean what I say. Find her, Jason. Find her, however you do that. We'd have to deal with her eventually anyway. Right? Then we'll see."

"This was just coincidence, you know. I wasn't looking for her when I decided to help Stephanie...."

"Keep denying things and I'll start to think there's something worth denying."

Without another word, Jason went into his office.

"Marlene...." Stephanie was irritated with Jason for agreeing so easily, even though she could see that he would have had to eventually.

"Gordo," Marlene said. "Got any of those tissues for me?"

Jason reemerged, with what looked like a set of jeweler's tools: picks, scrapers, swabs. This time, when he removed the yellow streak from the side of the car, no one tried to stop him.

"I usually have more paint to go on for a match than this." Jason looked at a small glass vial. Clear solvent filled most of it, but a thin layer of yellow floated at the top. "This is really police lab stuff. Fortunately yellow's a pretty straightforward color. Blues shift into green, reds into orange, with oxidation and light. Makes trying to figure out what color it was when it rolled off the line almost impossible. Yellow's pretty stable and has a nice single pigment, so there are no ratios to worry about." He cleared some space on the desk and turned on a bright white light. He pulled a peacock-tail Pantone color chip book out of a locked drawer, fanned it out, and held paint swatches against the tube.

"Can you tell the make of car from that?" Stephanie asked.

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Jason snorted. "Auto makers don't make their own paint. It's a huge web of contractors and subcontractors. Those polymers, resins, metal flakes, desiccants, pigments...I won't call it a craft industry, but it still is way more fragmented than most things are nowadays. No way I can tell the make of car from that. And, you know what? The exact color doesn't really matter to me here. This is really more habit than anything else. But I do have the actual pigment with me here — given your description of the accident, probably from the front right portion of this car. There are resonance linkages, aesthetic to retinal. Pretty technical stuff, not usually of interest to clients." He sighed. "The worst part of my job, color. Bumper gets painted at the same time as the car, and, you know what? It comes out different, right off the line: temperature, plastic versus metal, the slight amount of flex additives in the bumper paint. Clients always remember the bumper being the same color as the car. No one ever really looks at their car, except when it comes out of the body shop. Then it's 'Why doesn't it match?' 'It *never* matched' just isn't an answer they're ever going to hear." He shook his head in despair at his doomed position, trying to satisfy the childish needs of emotionally vulnerable people who'd had car accidents.

He looked so comfortable with his color chips and pigment matching. It was a pity to have to rile him up again.

"Did you lose her through a curse?" Stephanie said.

He froze for a second, then folded up his Pantone book, cleared off his desk, and stood up. "Yes. He...took her. That was how I got started, on all this. Her car." He pointed at the Alfa Romeo Spider. "It was smashed flat, under an eighteen wheeler. I thought she was dead. But she wasn't dead. The guy with the car collection. I think he collected her too."

"Did you think repairing that car would help you find her?"

"It did. It taught me a lot. But it was only the first step on a long road."

"A road you're getting to the end of." Stephanie couldn't believe that the solution to her problem was going to hurt her friend. But Marlene had already offered to back away once. Any more, and Marlene would get annoyed. No new information had surfaced, so there was no reason for her to reconsider her decision. That was the way Marlene worked things.

"Maybe. We'll see." Jason sighed. "The price...."

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Stephanie felt a chill. "Yes? What will you need from me? I never had an imaginary friend."

"You and Marlene talk a lot."

"Is that bad? Was she not supposed to have told me?"

"Oh, no. Not at all. Just...when you talk to her, tell her that...this doesn't make me happy."

"Come on, Jason. You really want to use me as some kind of back channel to give her some idiotic nonsense like that? It doesn't matter if it was accidental, or coincidental, or what, but you're going to hurt her because of what she brought in here for you. Because of me. You can stop. Just fix my car like a normal body shop would. I'll deal with the damn number. I've almost forgotten it."

"Now who's giving nonsense? You're a good friend, Stephanie. But Marlene's right. If I don't do it, if I leave it hanging, I won't be doing anyone any favors. Plus, I want to give that arrogant s.o.b. one in the eye." His voice was suddenly fierce. "Don't you?"

"What will you want from me?"

"The number."

"The phone number. The wrong one?"

"Yes. If this all works, it will be wiped from your mind. When it goes, I want it."

Stephanie took a breath. Was it valuable in some way? Was she giving up something crucial? "Okay. It's a deal."

They shook hands, and looked over at where Marlene stood by Cliff and Gordon as they played an old board game of Panzer warfare, an endless expanse of hexagons representing the entire Eastern Front. The two old men, one bald, one hairy-eared, fiddled with stacks of cardboard squares. Gordon was Stalin, Cliffie Hitler.

"Guderian," Cliff looked at Stephanie. "I'm Guderian, for God's sake."

"What?" Stephanie said.

"Aren't you going south along the Dnieper?" Marlene asked him. "Think of all that grain!"

"Excuse me, missy, but could you please stay out of it?"

Marlene looked up at Stephanie and Jason and winked. If she regretted letting things go ahead, she gave no sign of it.

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Jason reached into a dark corner and pulled out a big chunk of Styrofoam that had once cradled a computer or piece of audio equipment. He grabbed a screwdriver off a shelf — every level surface seemed to have at least two or three tools on it — and dug a small round hole in it, just the right size to hold the vial firmly.

On the other side of the shop, he shoved the Styrofoam in one of the holders on a four-unit paint shaker that usually handled gallon cans. He tugged and readjusted until he was satisfied that it would hold.

The shake started loud and got louder, until Stephanie was sure it would shake itself into pieces, somehow unbalanced by having only one tiny container with a few fluid ounces in it. The vial blurred into a line, and the streak of yellow seemed to get brighter, as if glowing. Then the line — that shaker really was out of adjustment — shifted into two-dimensional shapes, like traces on an oscilloscope in an old sci-fi movie: an oval, an hourglass, a ridged thing, then a dancing wiggling thing that froze, for an instant, into a jagged ideogram, which then vanished.

"Cliffie?" Jason looked up at a car that had just pulled into the far bay. "Could you take care of that guy? He's here for an inspection. Overdue, looks like. Give him whatever help he wants."

"Hey, I was just about to capture Moscow! Okay, okay." Cliff got up and limped over to the yellow 1965 Pontiac Bonneville. "What do you know, the car that owned the '60s! And, boy, do we have some legacy emissions standards for you."

It was the car that had hit her. She could see the way the right headlight tilted away, shining on the Spider's gleaming blue fender. But she couldn't see anyone behind the black windshield. She started for it.

"You're not ready to meet him," Jason said in her ear. "Neither of us is. Not yet. Please."

"What do I get if I resist bashing his head in with a tire iron?"

"Release from the curse. Otherwise — "

"I'll be stuck with it?"

"Let's just say it wouldn't be under warranty. Here, put this on." He handed her a coverall. "It'll keep your clothes clean. Please excuse the name. It's our designated newbie coverall."

Above the right breast pocket on the stiff, oil-stained blue coveralls was an embroidered "Fartley."

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Stephanie paused, then shrugged and put it on. "Who's your newbie?"

"Cliffie. Well, he's been here eight years now and he's kind of not liking that coverall anymore. So we use it for guests."

Cliff had set up the headlight alignment test. "This guy should fail, Jason. Look at — "

"I know. We'll take care of it."

That blue Italian sports car wasn't anything Stephanie had to do with. That was Jason's game. But it had all come together. Her need had played into what Jason needed. How much of that, she wondered, was accidental, and how much was planned?

"Hey, Cliffie!" Marlene yelled. "I've been playing your pieces for you, while you're busy. I just seized the Caucasus oil fields."

"That wasn't my strategy, girl! I was going for the urban areas."

"Show a little gratitude. That's all I ask."

"Can't you let him lose on his own?" Gordon hunched, trying to figure a way to escape the complete collapse of his strategy.

That was Marlene: a smart babe in a rubber dress with a genuine talent for mechanized warfare.

"Here's what I need for you to do." Jason handed her a clean blue wipe rag from the dispenser. "As I adjust the light, write your phone number down on this."

"My actual number?"

"Your actual number. I'll take it from there."

He knelt by the Bonneville and adjusted the headlight with a screwdriver. The misaligned headlamp beam left the Spider and crept toward the orientation cross on the wall. Stephanie grabbed a ballpoint and scribbled her phone number on the rag. As she got to the next to last digit, she hesitated. What was...she couldn't believe she was having trouble remembering her own phone number. But...was it...Jesus, of course, this was ridiculous. She managed to get the correct digit down, then finished.

As she did, the headlight hit the cross, and she could see.

There, in the light, was that room, the room where she had met him, and given him the bad number. It had only been...Jesus, six years ago? But already it looked like history. The clothes had funny proportions, the celebrities discussed no longer interesting, the cell phones too big.

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And there he was: the guy. He didn't look horrifying. A bit self-satisfied, maybe. And then there were those fingernails.... He watched her intently as she wrote down the phone number. He wasn't used to being balked. He would get back at anyone who did.

God, that bastard, putting that delayed-reaction booby trap into her temporary weakness. Sure, she should just have stood up to him and told him there was no way on Earth he was ever getting her telephone number. She'd tried, but he hadn't let it go.

Stephanie stepped forward into the scene, plucked the cocktail napkin off the table, and replaced it, neatly, with the completely out of context blue wipe cloth from the body shop. Let someone else worry about how little sense that made.

The headlights went off. Stephanie stumbled forward in the sudden darkness. Her foot slipped on a patch of grease and she was falling —

A hand caught her under the armpit and hauled her up. Once she was steady, the man stepped away. She turned to thank Jason for moving so quickly —

It was the driver of the Bonneville. The guy with the number. The man who had cursed her.

He stared at her. "Who the hell are you?"

"Who?" Stephanie was outraged. "You don't remember? Six years ago? I gave you my phone number, but I...changed it?"

"No, I don't remember. But I guess you deserved whatever I gave you." He started to smirk, but his expression turned to one of pain. He stared at her. He sucked in a breath. Then he started to cry.

She caught a glimpse of the vision he was having. A vision, she thought later, of their collision, the one she had avoided. She had given him the right number. He had called it. They had gone out. Then...a haze of possible courses as a relationship that shouldn't have happened limped to its death. Grim meals pressed flat with silence. Bodies next to each other in angry withdrawal. The final savage indifference of a relationship gone zombie.

"Now," she said. "Aren't you glad you never got that number?"

"That never could have...." He was gasping for breath. "Did that happen?"

"No way. Because I'm smarter than that." She noticed that a sleeve of his shirt was flopping loose. "I have something for you."

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He wiped his nose with his sleeve. As she popped the hood of her car she noticed, without surprise, that the damage had been repaired. The side of her car was gleaming, perfect. She unscrewed the oil cap and there it was: a cufflink. Not a piece of shattered mirror on a hose clamp, but a real cufflink, beautiful and elegant. She wiped the oil off with a rag and handed it to him.

He stared at it in wonder. "What...?"

"You must have dropped it. That night, when we met."

"Bull." He made a fist around it. "It's that stupid...." He raised his voice. "Hey, Jason! You out there, buddy? This is what it's all about, eh?"

"No," Stephanie said. "This is about what you did to me. That's it."

"Oh, sure. That moron. He's just playing around. You were in trouble. He helped you out. Aw." He made a mock sympathetic face that made her want to hit him. "Next time don't play so hard to get."

"Pay the cashier on the way out," Jason said from the darkness.

"Go ahead. Use the number. Call her. Then you'll learn what you never wanted to know." The guy laughed.

"Hey," Stephanie said. "Can I tell you something?"

"Yeah, sure, go ahead. I'm sure you can set me straight on everything."

"Be kind," she said. "Even when people disappoint you, just be kind."

"That's it?"

"You'll meet someone, someday."

"Screw you."

He got into his car and pulled out of the shop.

"Jeez," Marlene said. "What a sorehead."

Marlene finished up her chess game with Gordon, while Cliffie kibitzed and Jason sat on a high stool in the corner by the welding gear, talked on the phone, and cried.

"Hey, that rook's *pinned*," Cliff said. "Don't count on that to save your sorry old butt."

"Dammit, I can see that, can't I? Just shut up."

"And look out for that knight — "

"What did I just say?"

"It's here," Jason said through his tears. "Your car looks great. Perfect,

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just like before. You can just...yes. That's all. Just come get it."

Marlene slid a bishop to the outer edge of the board. "Check."

"Hey, man," Cliff said. "Look, a revealed check from that rook back down there. I'd forgotten about it."

"Great, thanks for pointing that out. After it already happened."

"Oh, you want me to predict the future?"

"Predicting the past isn't as helpful."

"Okay. Here's your future: mate in two, buddy."

"What?" Gordon stared at the board. "Ah, hell." He toppled his king, which rolled off the board, to be neatly caught by Cliff's foot, flipped into the air, and caught by Gordon, who set it back up. "Thanks for a good game."

"Thank you guys for a great afternoon." Marlene beamed.

The two old guys exchanged a glance.

"Well, you know...," Cliff said.

"Once you've had old, you'll be sold!" Gordon said.

All three of them laughed, although the two guys quit way before Marlene.

THE RAIN had stopped, but black clouds still covered the sky. Then a clear flash of sunlight came from behind, to illuminate the houses and trees on the other side of the street. The yellow light made them both vivid and flat. Everything glistened.

"I like a man who can cry," Marlene said.

"Depends on what he's crying about." Stephanie started the car. It was perfect, like nothing had ever happened to it.

And she couldn't even remember the false phone number, the one that Jason had reused to contact his vanished girlfriend.

"Me. He has to be crying about me."

"Or his mom."

"Okay. His mom. But not the Red Sox."

"Or his stock options."

"Right." Marlene rubbed her nose. "That's not sensitive. That's just dumb."

"You okay, Marlene?"

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"Been better."

Stephanie touched her friend's arm. "Hey! You're all goosey-pimply. We've got to get you out of this wet wind and into a dry martini."

"Green apple. There's a good place over in Davis Square."

"Do you have any idea of what's *in* one of those things, Marlene?"

Marlene stuck out her lower lip. "You never take me seriously."

"Oh, I certainly do."

They stopped at the corner. Behind them, they heard the garage door rumble up.

A blue Alfa Romeo Spider pulled out. It accelerated down the street, then screeched to a halt at the stop sign. The stocky, strong-jawed woman driving it was pretty, but wasn't an obvious candidate for romantic obsession. She turned and looked at Stephanie and Marlene.

"The throw's off on this shifter," she said. "He did his best, but sometimes you can't get things back exactly the way they were." She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. "No matter how hard you work at it."

Someone honked behind her. She didn't look back, but just waved her hand in a vague gesture, jangling her bracelets. After another blast on the horn, the other car pulled around.

It was a yellow Bonneville. It tore past, and, ignoring the stop sign, turned into traffic, causing a few honks of its own. None of them watched to see it disappear.

"Well," Stephanie said. "At least you're free now."

The woman turned to look at her. "He caught me through my weakness. How did you escape?"

"I wouldn't have talked to him in the first place," Stephanie said. "But I was trapped behind the pastry table."

"Don't you have weaknesses?"

Stephanie surprised herself by laughing. "Oh, I have weaknesses, believe me. But...I also have friends."

The woman didn't say anything else. Off throw or not, she shifted smoothly and vanished into the traffic without a sign of disturbance.

"So, Marlene," Stephanie said. "Is it time to get back there?"

Marlene looked at the garage as its door finally came back down. "Not just yet. It would look a little...desperate, don't you think? Unattractive trait, desperation."

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"No one likes being pulled under by a drowning person."

"Jeez, Stephanie, how charming."

"I was just agreeing with you. Let him wait a couple of days."

"You know, he learned this business, how to do it, looking for her. That was what got him started. So, finally, he found her. Now he's got a nice little career going. I hope he sticks with it."

"He sure enough saved me."

"No number?"

"My brain is totally clear. So transparent I could go into modeling."

Marlene snorted. "You want mental transparence? Did I ever tell you about the underwear model I dated?"

"I thought you liked men who worked with their hands."

"Don't make fun. It ends up being a more interesting story than you might think...." ☙

"I see you're not taking responsibility for your life — relying on charlatans and soothsayers..."

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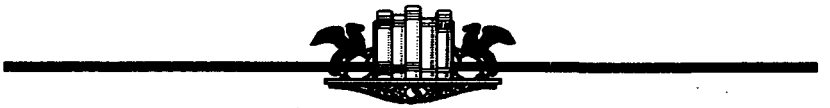

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Portable Childhoods, by Ellen Klages, Tachyon, 2007, $14.95.

THOUGH her first novel was marketed to young readers, and many of the protagonists of her short fiction are children, Ellen Klages is really writing for adults. I love how she explains the reason for that in a recent interview in *Locus*. She writes about childhood because:

"I keep trying to recapture that feeling of going someplace new and not knowing what you're going to find. It's childhood — not necessarily *my* childhood, or anybody else's, but a sense of wonder that most people lose by the time they are adults and that for some fortunate reason I seem to have kept."

Elsewhere she likens this sense of going into the past — how everything is new when you're a child — as akin to science fiction. Traveling is particularly an adventure for a child — or at least it was when she was growing up, before the homogenization of North American culture. Everywhere you went was different and she strives to evoke "the way that, because it wasn't near home, it was alien — not scary-alien, just *other*."

And this sense of place as though seen for the first time is one of her greatest strengths as a writer. Her stories evoke all the senses, giving us such rich descriptions that, by the time the story is done, her settings are as familiar to us as our own backyards. It doesn't matter if the story takes place in the New Mexican desert during the Forties (as in "The Green Glass Sea," which later grew into her novel of the same title), San Francisco in the unenlightened days of the Fifties ("Time Gypsy"), or the Carnegie Library sometime in the near future ("In the House of the Seven Librarians").

But setting is only a piece of the story. Klages also has the true storyteller's gift of character and

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plot. You believe in her people from the first moment they appear on the page, and you can't guess where the story is going. Well, you can guess, but she invariably takes us someplace we didn't think we'd end up.

In her afterword she tells us, "And so I write about fear and wonder, and discovering who you are and where you belong," and you know what? That's really what we look for in any good story — not to mention our own lives — and she does it so well.

Klages got a late start at the writing game and her output still isn't prodigious. The one novel and stories available under her by-line favor quality over quantity. They are extraordinarily imaginative and exhilarating, with a deep underlying sense of heart.

If many of the stories in *Portable Childhoods* aren't already considered classics in the field, they should be. So far, I haven't been disappointed in anything she's written.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, by Joss Whedon & Georges Jeanty, Dark Horse Comics, 2007, $2.99 an issue.

There's an interesting thing happening in comics lately.

Now I know that there's been a long tradition of adapting TV shows and movies into ongoing comic book series: retelling stories already seen on the screen, filling in between episodes, providing prequels, or continuing the adventures of the various characters after the film or series has ended.

For instance, Fox Atomic Comics/HarperCollins recently published a trade paperback *28 Days After: The Aftermath* which takes readers from the end of the 2003 film and leads them neatly into the upcoming sequel, *28 Weeks Later*.

But that book, while written by Steve Niles of *30 Days of Night* fame who certainly knows how to tell a story, is still someone else's vision. What's interesting is that now some original creators are turning to the comic book medium to bring us the untold stories of their characters.

So one of the executive producers of the CW show *Supernatural* is writing a prequel to that show in a six-issue series.

And Joss Whedon is bringing us "season eight" of his popular *Buffy the Vampire Series* in comic book form.

Regular readers might remember my disappointment with Nancy Holder's take on what happened

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after the end of the seventh season in her novel *Queen of the Slayers* (2006). I had a number of problems with the execution of the story, but my biggest problem with it was that it just didn't feel right.

This does.

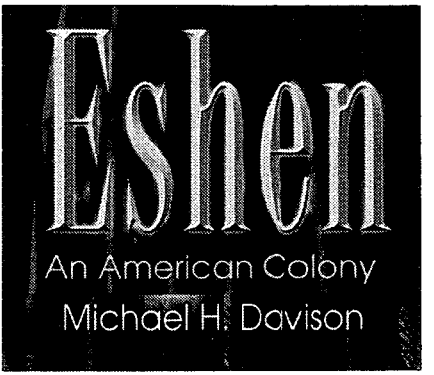
Instead of starting with the characters staring at the giant hole in the ground that had once been the town of Sunnydale, California, Whedon jumps ahead to when they're already established in their post-season seven lives. I've only seen the first two issues as I write this column, and I don't want to offer up spoilers, so let me just say that Whedon gives us what he does best: great dialogue, surprising turns of events that make perfect sense once they happen, and fun. Big fun.

Reading these two books reminds me of the joy I felt during the first few seasons of the series with its (at the time) innovative mix of drama, humor, action, and yes, monsters. And interestingly, here, just as in the series, the worst of the monsters can be human.

This series isn't Whedon's first foray into comics — not even his first foray into the Buffy universe in comic book form. That was *Slayer*, a futuristic look at his iconic creation that — to the delight of die-hard fans — played back into some pivotal elements of the final season of the TV series. He's also been scripting a very successful run on *The Astonishing X-Men* and has recently taken over *Runaways* on a monthly basis.

But this is the story that his fans have wanted to see: Whedon's vision of what would have happened next with Buffy and Co. Given the scope of the story as it has unfolded so far, and how much it would have cost to put this on the screen, I doubt we'd have seen on TV what Whedon's able to do here even if there *had* been an eighth season of *Buffy* broadcast.

It's worth picking up on a



The Esh, native inhabitants of a dark ominous forest on an alien world, terrify humans with an incomprehensible power to paralyze and induce psychosis until one man dares to face that peril and in so doing discovers an astounding truth about himself and all human beings.

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monthly basis, but most comic book companies are good about collecting storylines of a few issues in trade paperback format, and Dark Horse is no exception. Check your local comic book shop for details. Or even a regular book store that carries trade paperback collections.

You Don't Love Me Yet, by Jonathan Lethem, Doubleday, 2007, $24.95.

I remember not long after George R. R. Martin's *The Armageddon Rag* (with its subtitle "A Stereophonic Long-Playing Novel") was published in 1983, that someone — an agent or an editor, I can't remember which — very earnestly assured me that novels with a musical background — *particularly* those with a rock'n'roll background — didn't sell.

Well, *The Armageddon Rag* wasn't a huge bestseller, but it did well, and it certainly gained a dedicated following. As have any number of other books with a similar sensibility.

I know that I like them. Maybe it's because I've been a music junkie since the age of twelve. I can't imagine life without music, so why should books ignore it? And unlike a rock'n'roll movie where this terrific band has to show their actual chops for the story to be believable (the prose equivalent would be a book about a great poet; you'd have to provide the real deal in whatever poetry you put in your character's mouth), we can't hear the fictional band. So long as authors do their job well, we'll believe in the musicians.

Of course an author actually has to know something about music to pull that off, but Jonathan Lethem has that covered. I don't know if he's ever played in a band, but his nonfiction writing about music has authenticity. His piece on Bob Dylan for *Rolling Stone* comes immediately to mind. It's the kind of writing that makes you want to get up and put an album on. That's what the fictional book needs to do, although unfortunately, there's no album to turn to as our enthusiasm for the material rises.

All of this is to say that Lethem's done a terrific job in his new novel, describing the social workings and music of a young L.A. band that's trying to get off the ground.

As usual, I don't like to give too much away, but I think I can safely tell you that this isn't the usual rags-to-riches (and occasionally back-to-rags) tale that is often the

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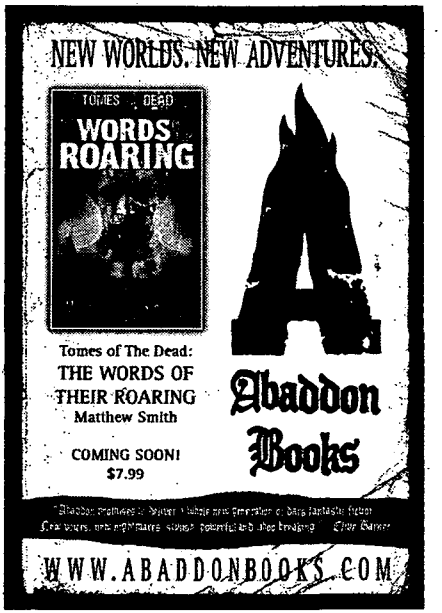
case with this sort of a story. Instead, the music, and the scene around it, is a backdrop to a fascinating cast of characters — interacting, loving, messing up...in other words, carrying on the way any group dynamic does.

Sure, I wanted to hear the music. But I could imagine it well enough (that's what a reader's imagination is for, after all). And I was absolutely captivated with pretty much everything in this book — the good bits, as well as the bits where you wanted to just shake the characters. It's sexy and funny, and brimming with drama.

And satire that isn't really mean-spirited but certainly spot-on. Like the Complaint Line, where bassist Lucinda works. People can call up to...well, just complain about whatever they want. (It's a kind of askew art installation, though the callers don't know that.) Or the masturbation boutique where drummer Denise works. (I don't think I need to explain that.) Or the band's first gig where they've been hired to play almost inaudibly while the dance floor is filled with people who are dancing, each listening to their own personal music device. (Another "art" project, though this one doesn't quite come off as planned.)



Lethem slips in and out of our field, but the commonality all his books hold is that they're inventive, addictive, and very good.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction, edited by George Mann, Solaris Books, 2006, $7.99.

Fast Forward 1: Future Fiction from the Cutting Edge, edited by Lou Anders, Pyr, 2007, $15.

THERE ARE these windows that open from time to time. The old days of *Astounding*. Horace Gold with *Galaxy*, the advent of *F&SF* itself. Gold Medal Books. Venues that spring up and allow writers a new voice, new freedoms. Serving as amanuensis for those already established, likely as not such venues also help give rise to an entire new population of writers.

One of those windows sprang open in the late sixties and seventies with the proliferation of original anthologies, non-thematic collections of theretofore unpublished stories. Damon Knight's *Orbit* (twenty-one volumes, 1966-1980) led the pack. Harking back to the *original* original anthology, Fred Pohl's *Star Science Fiction* (six volumes, 1953-1959), *Orbit* was promptly joined by Terry Carr's *Universe*, Harry Harrison's *Nova*, and Bob Silverberg's *New Dimensions*, not to mention the colossus of them all, Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions*; there was also a second tier including David Gerrold's *Alternities*, Delany's and Hacker's *Quark* and, further along, Roy Torgeson's *Chrysalis*. Many of my generation cut their teeth as writers on these anthologies; many just a bit younger cut their teeth as readers on them.

All the barricades were down, many of us felt: we could write what and as we wished. *And* be read.

It could be argued that the market simply was responding to demand, that a new audience had come up, an audience disenchanted with the genre status quo, an audience jonesing for new ideas and new modes of expression.

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It could equally be argued that the product was already there — that the dozen or so genre magazines and many other short-story markets publishing sf had stimulated genre growth, with new writers pushing hard at the gates — and that the economics of the time (cheap printing, low overhead, wide distribution) made it practical for publishers to forge these new smitheries.

It is probably no surprise to readers of this magazine that the market for short fiction has since declined, both within the borders of sf and without. Few general-circulation magazines now publish fiction. Most short fiction nowadays finds its home in literary journals of one sort or another or, increasingly, on the Internet. We've but a scant handful of professional-level sf magazines left, these walking a tightrope of ever-diminishing subscriptions, lacunate distribution, and escalating costs. As for anthologies, over the past quarter-century or so the theme anthology has reigned, to the extent that I once proposed a collection of great nose stories, half-fearful that I might be offered a contract.

Whatever the explanation for the purchase those early anthologies found, no recent series — *Full Spectrum*, the relaunched *Universe*, or *Starlight*, among others — has shown the enduring viability or the vitality of older series. Those that have endured the longest, anthologies such as *Polyphony* (edited by Deborah Layne and Jay Lake) and *Leviathan* (edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Forrest Aguirre), have come from small independent presses, and from editors eager to broaden the boundaries of the genre.

One likes to believe that we may be poised to see a revival of the original anthology. Here on my desk are two of the latest avatars, both of them, interestingly enough, tied directly to new publishing ventures — proprietary, if you will — and functioning, one must suppose, as de facto manifestos. Both, as well, rather adamantly *science fiction* anthologies.

George Mann, editor of *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction*, in speaking of the short story as "the lifeblood of our genre," actually uses the word manifesto. This collection presages, he tells us, what is to come under the Solaris imprint.

And a revival — of the excitement, the ferment, even of the controversies swarming about the original anthology in its heyday — is precisely what editor Lou Anders of *Fast Forward 1* calls for. Science fiction he characterizes as "a tool

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for making sense of a changing world." Anthologies such as his and Mann's, publishers such as Solaris and Pyr, could be the toolboxes.

Not many new names here, in either anthology — mostly well-known writers sidestepping from the current magazines, where their craft was honed.

The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction is far the more traditionally biased of the two, and several stories herein, in their dependence on the big idea, their reach for vision, could almost be from the Golden Age — not throwbacks or pastiche, but reimaginings, recreations.

At least three of the stories herein take war as their theme. Many others, even if obliquely rather than patently (as in "Cages" and "The Farewell Party"), center on religious issues. Not surprising, since sf is a literature of extremes, war being the extreme of social polity and religion the extreme of humankind's ontological yearning, but it does cause one to wonder what might be in the air.

The volume opens with a brilliantly written parable of war and human guilt, "In His Sights" by Jeffrey Thomas, the sort of story that only an arealist mode such as science fiction can offer.

> The other young returnees kept looking at him, wondering what horrors were concealed by his mask. The mask looked like several layers of black plastic, vacuum-formed to his face, with openings for his eyes, nostrils, and mouth. From his eyes, with their epicanthic folds, they could at least tell that he was of Asian ancestry. But what wounding had he suffered?

A soldier returns from war with the blue-skinned Ha Jiin wearing the face of his last kill, living a shadow life among a society of civilians and able finally to rid himself of that face only by further violence. The ending is powerful, the moral confusion and burden of guilt palpable; and the shifts in point of view precisely mirror the blurring of identities at the very heart of the story.

The volume's sixteen stories continue with (among others) "C-Rock City" by Jay Lake and Greg van Eekhout and "Zora and the Land Ethic Nomads" by Mary Turzillo, both with a fine narrative energy to them; "The Bowdler Strain" by James Lovegrove, a tongue-in-cheek tale of those who would cleanse language (and which reminds me

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strongly of stories by the great Fritz Leiber); Brian Aldiss's nightmarish fairy tale "Four Ladies of the Apocalypse"; and Neal Asher's "Bioship," with a future Captain Ahab and crew riding, as it were, *in* the whale.

Paul Di Filippo, with "Personal Jesus," contributes a story that's likely to be remembered and talked about for some time. Scientists, you see, have stumbled onto this chip that, well, channels god? And now everyone carries around a godPod, connected directly to...what? As always, Di Filippo humanizes the story, focusing on poor-pitiful-me Shepherd Crooks (Dickens would have loved that name) before unfolding onto larger vistas. The story's ending, pulled bodily from the cyclorama, could easily have concluded an episode of early TV's Science Fiction Theater.

Ian Watson's "Cages" is one of those stories that proceeds and finds its strength primarily in image. In a single day there appeared tens of millions of hoops, jump points through which came the Varroa, looking like giant bees and infinitely more inscrutable. Shortly behind them, and accomplished within a week, came the impediments now sported by all adults, often in the form of a cage about the knee, head, or genitals, sometimes a living cat attached at the person's elbow, or someone else's eye.

> Svelte's hair cascades blackly and the collar of her crimson shirt gapes wide to accommodate a hexagonal neck-curse of brass, which holds her chin high. Her impediment looks the height of funky fashion, something chosen deliberately rather than inflicted upon her.

"Third Person" by Tony Ballantyne is a projection of the idiocies of surgical strikes, targeted weapons, and contained wars. British troops carry on a frantic war as Spanish-speaking civilians go about their daily lives, threatening to sue if impinged upon by the battles raging about them; a drug given to "conscripts" takes away volition, so that they watch what is happening, what they are doing, as if reading about someone else. This is a marvelously paced, visceral story employing point of view to full effect.

Every group, be it musicians, accountants, or physicists, has its own cache of in-jokes. Mike Resnick's and David Gerrold's "Jellyfish," concerning the maladventures of one Dillon K. Filk, science

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fiction writer, fills the bill for sf. I was reminded again of Fritz Leiber's satires, of John Sladek's juicy pastiches, of the silliness of Harry Harrison at his best. Nor, on another note, could I avoid recalling Barry Malzberg's high comedy *Herovit's World*.

My personal favorite here has to be Stephen Baxter's "Last Contact," a deeply affecting, bittersweet look at endings. As the universe winds down and gets set literally to dissolve from beneath them, Caitlin and mother Maureen meet and talk of shoes and ships and sealing wax. Some stories seem to reach down to the very bedrock of what we are as humans; this is one. We all know that the sweetness of the world is inextricably mixed with its horrors. We know that all things must end, yet must live, day by day, year after year, as though they will not.

Fast Forward 1, the edgier of the two anthologies, opens, appropriately enough, with a meditation on dreams and the forging of art, "YFL-500" by Robert Charles Wilson, in which a mediocre, marginal artist goes in search of the woman whose purloined dreams provided inspiration for his single fully realized piece. Wilson allows the reader's emerging perception of the narrative, quest to romance to exploitation, to mirror the protagonist's own shifting comprehension: "Gordo's heart did double beats as he tried to maintain his calm. This, after all, was what he had been seeking for so long. This, or some sense of his own authenticity."

Several names surface in both anthologies: Tony Ballantyne, Paul Di Filippo, Mike Resnick, Mary A. Turzillo, Stephen Baxter. With "No More Stories," Baxter contributes what is essentially another take on his story "Last Contact" from Mann's anthology: quite a different tale, but one with much the same mood and theme, not to mention the same fine writing. This is a story written close to life and, I suspect, close to the author's heart, setting small lives against the cosmic backdrop. Like "YFL-500" it is also a meditation on the power of art, if not to transform, if not to help us understand, then at very least to help us truly experience our own lives and those of others.

"YFL-500" suggests that art may be finally little more than compulsive pattern-making; Justina Robson's "The Girl Hero's Mirror Says He's Not the One" suggests that the manner in which we live our lives may be, or could be, the same.

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> She is living in a Base Reality not unlike Prime, the original reality old Earthers used to share before Mappa Mundi, except it has fifty more shades of pink and no word for "hate." Her reality is called Rose Tint, and it was the one relatively mild hacker virus she was glad to catch.

A. M. Dellamonica's "Time of the Snake" again takes up war as subject, in this case a civil war fostered by a *truly* foreign power. Aliens called Squids have occupied Earth, and two factions fight for home/human rule, the Friends of Liberation (Fiends, for short) and the Squid-sponsored Democratic Army (Dems, as in the Fiend slogan "It's Dems or us"). The story begins "My offworlder allies don't trust me." Soon, with a sudden flipflop of plot, it becomes apparent that no one should: "Then she turns back to her work and I start down the ladder, leaving my friends and enemies together, locked in the endless dance of mutual annihilation." As with "Third Person" from Mann's anthology, it's the details, the authenticity of scene, that make the story so effective. Even its plot reversal seems to serve a higher function than simple narrative contrivance; it seems at the very foundation of the story itself.

Ian McDonald's "Sanjeev and Robotwallah" revisits the AI- and contradiction-ridden future India of one of my favorite novels from last year, *River of Gods*, taking on combat robots, the nature of media-induced heroism, and the loss of idealism. Wars again, small and large.

"Jesus Christ, Reanimator" finds Ken MacLeod in James Morrow territory:

> The Second Coming was something of a washout, if you remember. It lit up early-warning radar like a Christmas tree, of course, and the Israeli Air Force gave the heavenly host a respectable F-16 fighter escort to the ground, but that was when they were still treating it as a UFO incident. As soon as their sandals touched the dust, Jesus and the handful of bewildered Copts who'd been caught up to meet him in the air looked about for the armies of the Beast and the kings of the earth.

(Hint: Jesus doesn't do much better this time around.)

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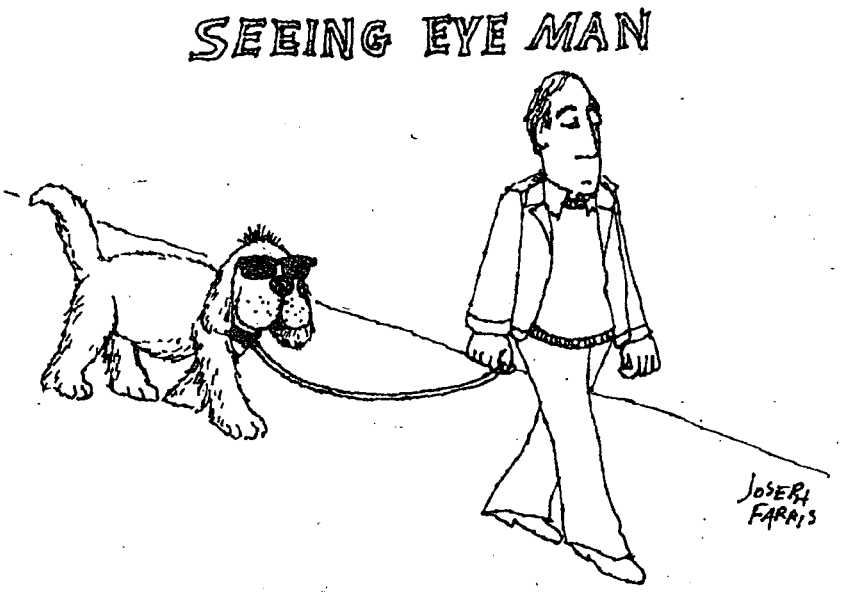
Among other standout stories of the twenty-one included in *Fast Forward 1* are Di Filippo's wickedly wacky "Wikiworld" ("You probably remember my name from when I ran the country for three days"), John Meaney's gothic-for-our-time "Sideways from Now," Elizabeth Bear's tender "The Something-Dreaming Game" about autoasphyxiation and the efforts of a dying race not to be forgotten, resident genius Gene Wolfe's "The Hour of the Sheep," and Paolo Bacigalupi's chilling sketch of the sacrifices parents make, "Small Offerings."

> Even with its miniature hands and squinched face and little penis, it's nothing. Just a vessel for contaminants.... Just something to scour the fat cells of a woman who sits at the top of a poisoned food chain, and who wants to have a baby.

A new breed of original anthologies? Redesigned engines and fresh energies for science fiction as a genre? Too early to say. But one dares hope — right along with George Mann and Lou Anders. And meanwhile, we've thirty-seven excellent new stories.



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Albert Cowdrey knows a bit about how diplomacy works — he used to head the Conventional War Studies Branch at the US Army Center of Military History in Washington, DC. His new story shows that in addition to understanding diplomacy, he also has a keen understanding of how thing work throughout the galaxies and a gift for spinning out stories.

Envoy Extraordinary

By Albert E. Cowdrey

BLAZING IN THE GOLD UNIFORM of UNIDIP — the Universal Diplomatic Service — Vincent Khartoum emerged onto the pad of Malakatha's ugly little shuttleport. A ragged serfboy followed, sweating under a small hillock of luggage.

Lined up at ramrod attention, an honor guard of gleaming bots presented nine-point-four impact weapons as Vincent lumbered past, pushing his broad bemedaled frontage before him like a galleon's prow. At the end of the file an armored limousine opened its multi-leaved passenger door like an unfolding chrysanthemum.

Vincent threw back his head and stared down his nose, a trick that made him seem even taller than his two-meters-one.

"Why," he demanded, "must I endure the tedium of wheeled transport instead of the royal flyer with guardian drones that is my due?"

He spoke in a degenerate dialect called Low Vexish, the common language of Malakatha. In reply the driver — a black box — buzzed, "A temporary halt to air traffic has been ordered since a traitor attempted to bomb His Supremacy's palace."

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"Why doesn't he get rid of his rebels, eh?"

"He will do so almost immediately. They are but a few malcontents. He will erase them with his frown. Most Honored Sir, pray honor this wretched slave by entering. We have before us a lengthy drive to the Zot."

Puffing and grumbling, Vincent did so. Like his gut, his rump was impressive, and took some time to settle among the purple faux-velour cushions. At last the massive door closed, and the motor purred into activity. As the car began to move, he was thinking: The Zot, the Zot — what did my infopacket say about the Zot?

Ah, yes. He remembered now. *A vast marshland inhabited by giant leeches, carnivorous glongbars, poison-footed blids, and King Drax.*

Why the monarch chose to hide from his subjects in the middle of a primeval swamp became clear as the scenery of Malakatha unfolded.

Roadside villages featured decaying huts, ragged peasants climbing around on garbage heaps, and impaled bodies gazing blindly at the sky like speared frogs. The fields grew crops only of gibbets and gallows, all occupied. The sole large buildings were prisons where bemedaled officers saluted the king's limo while grim-looking guards presented arms and chain gangs prostrated themselves.

Viewing the wretched scene, Vincent found himself thinking: Good Lord — this place is worse than Peoria!

Though he concealed the fact as much as possible, he had indeed been born in Peoria, a big ramshackle city set like a navel ring in the middle of the Dark Continent of North America.

After the second-to-last war had erased all the Earth's capitals, places previously of little importance became vast centers of population: Sarajevo; Minsk; Moosejaw; Jongking; and Peoria. Vincent had been born thirty-six years ago to poor, hard-working parents who, along with 32,691 others, inhabited a huge tenement called the Peoria Honeycomb. Urine-fouled hallways, air shafts piled with rubbish to the third story, and perpetual smells of cooking SAPS (Stewed and Processed Scraps, the chief food of the poor) made life in the Honeycomb anything but sweet.

Amid these grim conditions the young Vincent had dreamed of freeing the oppressed. He disfigured his school notebooks with drawings of himself bearing a sword in one hand (to liberate) and a torch in the other

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(to enlighten). In his high school's senior play he took the part of Macduff and enacted the final sword fight so vigorously that the boy impersonating the tyrant Macbeth required plastic surgery.

Then Vincent grew up. Like many another child of poverty, he embarked on a lifelong struggle to escape the company of the oppressed forever. On scholarship he entered the vast university center at Minsk, surviving the bitter Belarussian winters on a diet of SAPS and blini. After four years of struggle, he emerged with a *Summa cum laude* in History and Languages, copped a clerkship at UNIDIP, and moved to the lush African surroundings of New Great Zimbabwe, the Capital of All Humankind.

There he mastered both human and alien tongues, from Amharic to Low Vexish to Xlu. He studied the mysteries of Protocol until he knew exactly why an Assistant Deputy outranked a Deputy Assistant. He attended seminars on Deception, where he learned how to promise everything and nothing in the same breath. He joined a debating society and practiced the tricks of Rhetoric — often called the "science of flimflam" — on every possible occasion. He found a patron in Maxim Balabanov, the Second Secretary, became an Area Specialist in Most Remote Space, and began to win promotions — first to Deputy Assistant, then to Assistant Deputy.

By this time the idealistic schoolboy and the hard-working university student both had evaporated and been replaced by a portly, oldish young man noted for his glossy exterior and his profound ability to mask his true thoughts. He married an absolutely appropriate woman, a thin, elegant Franco-Cambodian whose very name (Marie-Elysée de Phnompenh) exuded an antique elegance. The couple rented a palazzo on an alley off the Souk and entertained to the limit of Vincent's now substantial salary.

Many a formal dinner gave him increasing gravitas — about ninety-nine kilos of it — and his personality evolved in tandem with his physical presence. At home he lost interest in sex and became pompous, stuffy, and exasperating, and Marie responded by starting an affair with (appropriately) a chargé d'affaires. But away from home, his career flourished.

He joined the diplomatic team that negotiated an end to the First Alien War, exhibiting to great effect his mastery of Xlu — a very difficult tongue with only one vowel (a sort of grunt, represented in textbooks by the letter u) but six hundred consonants, some of which he needed a

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prosthesis to enunciate. His combination of fluency, adept lying, and the sheer intimidation of his size (the average Xluan stood only 1.1 meters tall and weighed about twenty kilos) were credited with gaining many of the unfair advantages the human species reaped from the treaty.

By this time Peoria had sunk far beneath Vincent's mental horizon. He'd entirely ceased to communicate with his parents, or even to acknowledge that he had any. Whenever their neighbors in the Honeycomb asked his father what had happened to Little Vince, the old man would spit and reply, "We dunno and we duhwanna know."

By 10275 of the Absolute Calendar (which had replaced the myth-based calendars of the past) Vincent Khartoum felt ready for an ambassadorship. Imagine his astonishment and chagrin when he learned that he was to be dispatched (on a mere military transport) to negotiate with the contemptible tyrant of Malakatha!

SECOND SECRETARY Balabanov was a grossly handsome man who wore a vast tawny wig like a lion's mane. His lifestyle was extravagant, his mind devious. He liked to say that Baron Talleyrand (Napoleon's foreign minister, who betrayed everybody and profited handsomely thereby) was the greatest man in history.

Balabanov aimed to become First Secretary, then arrange the death of some elderly Minister of State in order to take his place. He proclaimed over and over, to the point of tedium, that to succeed in life one had to plan ahead. Vincent found him both admirable (the man knew how to climb the bureaucratic ladder) and repugnant (he was such a piece of *#ulupu-!pu*, or "walking excrement" as a Xlu phrase pungently expressed it).

After delivering the bad news about Vincent's new appointment, Balabanov made an effort to butter up his subordinate.

"You will, of course, go to Malakatha as Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary. 'Plenipotentiary' means you'll have full power," he explained.

"I'm familiar with the term," Vincent murmured, his face smooth and resolutely pleasant. Inwardly, he was raging.

"It's a nasty little rock, from all I've heard, and King Drax is a foul sort of creature. Well, it takes all kinds to make a galaxy."

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"May I record that phrase?" Vincent asked. "Your Excellency's philosophical insight never ceases to astonish me."

"Save your brown-nosing for King Drax," replied Balabanov severely. "You may need it. What he does on his own world is deplorable but no business of ours. However, we've learned that he's preparing a fleet of armed vessels to engage in piracy. What affects the spaceways — especially the exit of the trans-Aran wormhole, less than a microparsec from his lair — is our business."

"So I'm to negotiate the liquidation of his fleet. What can I offer in return?"

"Subsidies to fifty trillion sols if he agrees — war if he does not. As I said: full power. We trust your competence absolutely." After a moment's thought he added, "Start by offering him forty and see what happens. And pick up a nice medal — say a Grand Order of the Plenum — from the heraldry office. If he's a good swine, award it to him."

Seductively he went on, "When you've brought this business to a successful conclusion, I've got a nice ambassadorship waiting for you. On a Xlu world, where your famous fluency can serve humanity best."

"*Uu knu* !ulthth u! zwuq,*" Vincent replied with a bow, knowing well that Balabanov didn't understand a word of Xlu. Considering what he was inviting the Second Secretary to do, that was just as well.

"You leave in fifteen days," Balabanov finished. "You'll start out-processing at once." Rising, he lifted one hand in farewell, declaring grandly, "Your return will be the signal for peace — or war."

As the door to Balabanov's palatial office whispered shut behind him, Vincent was wondering: Why don't I believe him?

Out-processing meant a tedious trek from one division of UNIDIP to another, getting his records checked and cleared in case he perished by some mishap in Deep Space.

He encountered all the usual annoyances. The Bursar found that he owed nineteen sols and a demilune because a line-item in his budget had been disallowed. The Chief Librarian at Infocenter charged him eleven lunes fine for failing to return a virtual-reality game called *Sex All Possible Ways* that he certainly hadn't charged out. In Medcheck, bots zapped him with sixteen different injections, leaving his shoulders and upper arms black and blue. "The disease environment of Malakatha is

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really quite exciting," enthused the Chief Medical Officer, who then ordered an incipient hernia corrected even though Vincent protested that he felt fine.

For minor surgery, the operation was quite sufficiently annoying. The wound was glued, of course, so that Vincent had no stitches or staples to be removed, as in the dark ages of medicine. Still, he had to take painkillers for a week, and his tailor had to let out his uniforms in the waist and crotch before he again felt comfortable in them. While waiting, he visited the Heraldry Office and picked up a Grand Order of the Plenum. The medal was the size of a soup plate, with a golden chain and a jeweled clasp. It was so big and hung so low on the recipient that it was known unofficially as "the ninny protector."

"It's exactly the sort of thing the little toad ought to find irresistible," said the Chief of Heraldry. "Just don't break the plastic envelope until you're ready for the presentation. The gold's only two microns thick, and it'll rub off if you look at it."

"In short," groused Vincent, "I'm to cross Deep Space to present a fake medal to a sleazy tyrant as a reward for accepting an enormous bribe not to become a pirate."

"That's diplomacy," shrugged the Chief of Heraldry.

Vincent's mood was not improved by his wife's obvious eagerness to see him go. "I'll help you pack," was the limit of Marie-Elysée's concern.

"Do you realize that I'm being sent to a miserable backwoods planet ruled by a homicidal maniac?" Vincent demanded.

"I'm sure it'll be terribly interesting," she said, tossing his newly altered and ironed dress uniform all anyhow into a portmanteau. "Balabanov is very high on you."

"Balabanov is high only on Balabanov. I'm suspicious of this whole business. There's some deep, devious plot underway, I'm sure of it."

"My dear, that's the way things are at UNIDIP. It's a bottle of scorpions, as you very well know."

"'UNIDIP' is a very undignified slang expression," Vincent intoned in his most pompous manner.

"Even Balabanov uses it in unbuttoned moments," Marie-Elysée replied, and Vincent was too concerned over the way she was wrinkling his dress uniform to wonder where she had seen Balabanov unbuttoned.

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* * *

Following an unsatisfactory departure, Vincent had to endure the crashing boredom of interstellar travel.

Traversing the Trans-Aran Wormhole turned out to be rather like taking the subway from Peoria to Minsk. Against the ports pressed ebon nothingness — an updated version of the ancient satirist Mark Twain's "firmament of black cats." Vince, lying on a hard bunk in his stateroom, brooded: To think that idiots used to call this mankind's ultimate adventure!

The military unit traveling on the transport were replacements for the garrison guarding the wormhole's exit. The commander tried to keep his people busy, setting up a dense schedule of Lectures, Hand-to-Hand Combat, Happy Hours, and Orgy Groups to fill the timeless time on shipboard.

Vincent skipped most of these dubious pleasures, but did attend a lecture on New and Improved Weaponry. Here he learned about the wonderful progress being made in the technology of warfare: particle-beam generators, meson-bond disintegrators, and atomlasers were being deployed, along with a new munition called Obliterol that combined the convenience of plastic explosive with the punch of cold fusion. Sensing a bargaining chip in these fearsome weapons, Vincent hastily jotted the information down on the cuff of his left sleeve.

And yet....

Back in his tiny stateroom, lying on his hard bunk, he found all his doubts about his mission returning. The new weapons — which Balabanov surely must know about — made the business of bribing Drax harder than ever to understand. Couldn't the heavy cruisers protect the wormhole exit? A king of France once commented that Paris was well worth a Mass. Was Malakatha — poor, dismal, remote, harried by a lunatic ruler — really worth fifty trillion or a war?

Baffled, Vincent signed out a machine and played over and over his memory cube on Malakatha. It didn't make pleasant listening. On that benighted planet, it seemed, the exquisite tedium of life was relieved only by the agonizing methods of inflicting death.

"Torture is much cultivated as an art, a science, and a recreation," the cube remarked with mechanical sang-froid. "The usual punishment for

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displeasing King Drax is to be boiled, boned, diced, and scattered. Simple impalement is customary for lesser offenses, such as failing to genuflect when his name is mentioned."

Beautiful.

When at last the ship dropped out of the wormhole, Vincent was torn between relief that most of the journey lay behind him and anxiety over what might lie ahead. Standing on the ship's bridge behind the Celestial Navigator's chair, he watched a binary star system emerge from the night like a pair of baleful eyes. A nearby pinpoint of light grew to a tiny crescent; the crescent enlarged to the semblance of Luna.

"Malakatha," said the navigator, turning to him. "Have fun."

SO FAR HE wasn't having much.

The landscape of prisons and filthy villages ended at a barren shoreline where the limo rolled onto a seemingly endless causeway. To left and right, leaden water glimmered with the reflections of a large sun, a small sun, and an errant moon. As the journey stretched out interminably, Vincent tried to chat with the black box in order to polish up his Low Vexish. He found it hard going.

"Malakatha is a place of exceptional beauty," he began, with the veracity of a true diplomat.

"Beauty is a highly subjective concept," the box opined. "No doubt what some consider beautiful, others consider drab. And," it added after lengthy meditation, "vice-versa."

Vincent tried again. "Am I correct in believing that the weather is somewhat warm for this time of year?"

"Warmth exists only with reference to cold," mused the box. "Thus I am unable to reply to Your Excellency's astute observation."

"King Drax has the reputation of being beloved by all the people of Malakatha."

"Men and women are, I believe, classed as animate beings. If we suppose that 'animate' refers to organisms capable of irritability and reproduction, I am capable of neither; therefore, in attempting to comment on the thoughts of such beings, my judgment would inevitably be skewed."

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"My friend, you and not I should be the Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary."

"Alas, this modest and primitive device would be incapable of so exalted an endeavor."

Vincent gave up. The rest of the trip lasted either a standard hour or two weeks, depending on one's viewpoint. Then low greenish-bluish-purplish banks took form along the horizon, and a reedy landscape of muted colors surfaced like the iridescent carcass of a dead whale.

The limo left the causeway and rolled down a highway of fused silicon pebbles between gloomy, vine-entangled trees. It passed through enormous fortified gates watched over by batteries of autocannon and past another execution ground decorated with more stakes and bodies, some of which were still twitching. At last — at very, very long last — the vehicle halted before King Drax's palace.

Emerging stiffly, Vincent gazed glumly at beetling towers, walls clad in bile-colored vine, enormous sealed and draped windows reflecting a sky filled with ecru clouds. The air had the greasy feel of marshland vapors everywhere, somehow chilly and oppressive at the same time. The oxygen level was tolerable, but a fractional increase in gravity did nothing to lighten his considerable weight.

He was absorbing these sensations when coarse gravel crunched underfoot and a gleaming personage approached with stately stride — either an expensive bot or a human bot-impersonator wearing chrome armor.

"King Drax," he or it announced in ringing tones, "Third Sun of the Planet Malakatha and Father of His People, bids you welcome. Pray allow this unworthy slave to direct you to your accommodations."

Vincent inclined his head very slightly and followed the unworthy slave up a mountainous stone staircase that had his unathletic lungs laboring long before he reached the top. He and his guide passed through a massive vaultlike door watched over by a grim-looking bot carrying the usual nine-point-four. The door had two electronic locks, and the major-domo produced one key, the guard the other. Behind them the door was doubly relocked, giving Vincent the feeling that he was being interred in King Drax's private mausoleum.

The feeling intensified as he trekked through kilometers of dim-lit

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hallways. On every wall the monarch appeared in holographic images as a near-angelic presence triumphing over the forces of evil. The pictures were activated by movement, humming with flashing swords and gasping dragons as Vincent and the majordomo passed by, then lapsing into immobility behind them.

"King Drax hopes that his modest dwelling is acceptable to you," intoned the majordomo.

"Never in a hundred worlds have I been awed by such magnificence," Vincent replied automatically.

His mind was elsewhere. On Earth, Drax had appeared merely contemptible. Here at the center of his immense stone web he was an altogether more threatening figure. Vincent was beginning to wonder if he would leave this place alive.

Was that what Balabanov was up to? Getting King Drax to kill him, so that the Second Secretary could — could — could what? At UNIDIP one usually assassinated one's superior, in hopes of taking his place. What was the point of killing a subordinate? For some reason the word "unbuttoned" drifted across Vincent's mind, only to vanish into the limbo of inadmissible thoughts.

"Your Excellency's chamber," intoned the majordomo, unlocking and throwing open another massive door. "One prays that its modesty does not grate upon your refined sensibilities."

Vincent stepped into a room so vast it could have been used as an arena for indoor polo. Attached was a bath in which the whole garrison of the Trans-Aran Wormhole Exit could have scrubbed down. On a bed resembling a quilted grandstand his luggage awaited him, guarded by a valet bot.

"His Majesty will greet you at Seventeen," intoned the majordomo. The door closed, and was audibly locked twice.

As the bot unpacked him, laying out his faux-silk undersuits, his lounging attire, his dress uniform — even flashier than the one he was wearing — Vincent found himself wondering if being boiled, boned, diced and scattered would hurt very much. He rather thought it would.

Immaculate in his fanciest uniform, massive in his gravitas, a worthy representative of the government he served, Vincent followed with slow

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deliberate steps the gleaming majordomo into the King's presence, silently repeating to himself the first thing he'd learned at UNIDIP: the Diplomatic Decalogue.

I. Never shalt thou tell the truth, even as a last resort.
II. Thou shalt trust no one.
III. Never shalt thou concede a point without first gaining two.
IV. Always shalt thou seem to be that which thou art not.
V. Always shalt thou wear a face of marble, not of flesh.
VI. When gazing at Defeat, thou shalt envision Victory.
VII. When most helpless, thou shalt put on thy boldest front.
VIII. Ever shalt thou make a major issue of minor points, so that by conceding them thou mayest gain that which thou dost really desire.
IX. Ever shalt thou remember that whatever one side gains, the other side must lose.
X. Never shalt thou forget that diplomacy is the continuation of war by other means.

So true, he reflected. Ah, so true.

The audience room was predictably enormous. The real non-digital tyrant of Malakatha sat at the far end of it — a small, ill-favored man with bloodshot eyes, a scraggly pointed beard, and large knobby hands and knees. He wore a scarlet cape many sizes too big for him and sat on a vast golden throne. To Vincent, Drax looked like a small, old, nasty child wrapped in an adult's garment and sitting in his father's chair.

Vincent bowed, and the king nodded infinitesimally.

"I SUPPOSE YOU HAVE DOCUMENTS," a voice boomed, startling as a crash of thunder from an empty sky. "GIVE THEM TO THE SLAVE."

For the first time Vincent realized that Drax was seated behind a shield of bullet-and-laser-proof transplast that bisected the room. His amplified voice issued from button-sized speakers that lined the crown moldings of the walls.

Vincent gave up his documents and waited while the majordomo took the packet away, presumably to be tested for poison. After ten interminable minutes, it entered Drax's end of the throne room through a gilded door and handed them over. While Drax was reading, it returned to the

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anteroom with a chair whose seat was studded with sharp golden tacks.

"I prefer to stand," said Vincent hastily.

"King Drax desires you to sit," said the majordomo. "Very few enjoy the privilege of sitting in his presence."

"His Supremacy is too kind," Vincent murmured, lowering his broad backside onto what was clearly one of the lesser implements in Drax's arsenal of torments.

"FORTY TRILLION??" the thunder demanded. "THEY INSULT ME WITH AN OFFER OF FORTY TRILLION??"

Quite suddenly, and in spite of his fundamental discomfort, Vincent took a deep breath and relaxed.

King Drax's words were — as the celebrated revolutionary V. I. Lenin once had expressed it — the flash of lighting that illuminates reality. Vincent saw now that Drax had begun building his fleet, not to play the dangerous game of piracy, but in hopes of extracting a payoff to stop. So they could do business. And if Vincent became Drax's means of getting a huge bribe, then his life would be (relatively speaking) safe.

He reached another conclusion: for all his pretense of being Talleyrand, Balabanov was a fool. The Second Secretary was playing Drax's game. Maybe he never would become First Secretary after all.

Naturally, Vincent's face showed nothing of what he was thinking. Instead he put on a solemn and mournful mien and intoned, "Alas, Your Supremacy, the expenses of the late alien war have rendered anything more a simple impossibility."

From that point on, the fencing followed a predictable path. Drax varied explicit threats against the Trans-Aran Wormhole with long, boring disquisitions on his own military genius. In return, Vincent invited Drax to contemplate the improved armament of the cruisers guarding the Wormhole. "No doubt Your Supremacy will sleep sounder, knowing that so powerful a friend is permanently stationed *so... very... close... at hand.*" He lingered over the final phrase like an organist fondling the bass key in a Bach fugue.

Either Drax didn't understand or else possessed a true poker face, for the minuet of threat and counterthreat continued for another standard hour. Vincent's bottom suffered accordingly, and yet he refused to be rushed. Not for nothing were senior negotiators awarded the enviable title

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of *Culs de Pierre*, or Stonebutts. With infinite reluctance he allowed Drax to bargain him up to fifty trillion in return for admitting inspectors onto Malakatha to check on the demolition of the fleet.

"DO THE WRETCHED BUREAUCRATS OF UNIDIP NOT TRUST MY WORD?" Drax thundered.

"More than we trust the movement of the eternal stars," Vincent replied *avec suavité*. "But the Senate of the Worlds will insist on inspection before they vote the money, so we might as well include it in the treaty now. Renegotiation," he added, "would create so many uncertainties."

"YESSSSS," exhaled Drax, and Vincent drew a deep breath, like a man on the rack who sees his tormentors preparing to knock off for lunch.

"YOU WILL JOIN ME TONIGHT AT A FEAST CELEBRATING FRIENDSHIP, PEACE, AND LOVE," the little monster roared. "AFTERWARD, WE WILL SIGN THE TREATY."

The majordomo reentered. Vincent rose stiffly, suffering new pangs as pinched-off blood vessels began to throb. As he left the antechamber on stiff limbs, the king was stroking his scraggly beard to hide a smile — the smile of a man who had successfully swindled the Universal Government out of fifty trillion sols.

Back in his room, Vincent — disrobing with the aid of the valet bot — discovered that every piece of clothing he wore was soaked with sweat, while the broad seat of his undersuit was additionally spotted with blood. As he entered the bathroom for a long hot soak he was muttering, "*Wuk u !nu'uun ~kuk*!"

Meaning in Xlu, "What a lousy day!"

THE FEAST OF FRIENDSHIP, Peace, and Love took place in a hall with floorspace enough for a small battle.

At least Vincent's new chair was comfortable. Little else in the room pleased him. The holographic wall images were in constant distracting motion, while on the floor the spotted skins of slaughtered blids and glongbars made crepitant noises whenever Vincent moved his feet. A creature resembling a feathered monkey sat on the back of Drax's throne, gazing across the table at Vincent with garnet eyes.

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It, Drax, and Vincent were the only living creatures present. The thirty other guests at the table were polished display bots that conversed in atonal voices while pretending to eat from empty plates. After tasting the food that emerged from His Supremacy's kitchen, Vincent rather envied them.

"It is my pleasure," Drax remarked — minus his amplifiers, his voice was unpleasantly squeaky — "to begin each meal by recalling the fate of some former enemy."

He contemplated a cube of meat stuck on the end of his fork. "I remember this guy. A good, loyal servant. But he didn't love me — he obeyed me only because he had to."

He inserted the gobbet into his mouth and chewed slowly. "That wasn't good enough. Matter of fact, it still isn't."

Drax turned his head and spat out the morsel. The feathered monkey leaped down and devoured it, then returned to its perch. The meal ground on, course after course after course of golden dishes filled with unidentifiable remnants of birds, beasts, and (probably) humans.

!Uuu |dmu <squ'un duk, thought Vincent, meaning, "I hope this meal is subtracted from my time in hell."

At last the table was cleared by busbots, and the majordomo spread out two copies of the draft treaty for signing. With a pen that emitted dry purple ink, Vincent changed "forty" to "fifty" and he and King Drax initialed the number. Then, as recorded trumpet blasts greeted their action, they signed the documents for the Universal Government and for Malakatha.

The majordomo brought glasses of very tolerable wine, and Vincent and the king toasted each other again and again. Vincent's toasts were fulsome; Drax's condescending. Recorded trumpet blasts repeatedly drowned both of them out, so what they said probably didn't matter anyway.

Then it was time to award the Grand Order of the Plenum.

Opening the glittering box, Vincent broke the seal, peeled off the plastic envelope, and lifted out the medal, with its golden chain and jeweled catch, from the froth of faux silk where it lay. He would have decorated Drax himself, but the king halted him with a gesture.

"Give it to the slave," he squeaked.

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The majordomo received the medal with its left hand and passed its right over it. Clearly, its palm contained a scanner. For a few long seconds the ceremony halted while it processed the information — very long seconds for Vincent, who suddenly realized that Balabanov, simply by having a dollop of poison or an explosive pellet embedded in the medal, could cause Drax to destroy him.

"It is without foreign substances, O Sun of Our Lives and Our World," intoned the flashy bot. Vincent took a quiet but deep breath.

"Then give it to me," cried Drax, suddenly greedy as a spoiled child eyeing a new toy.

The majordomo circled the table, placed the golden chain around Drax's neck, and snapped shut the jeweled catch.

The flash that followed was visible from as far away as the shuttle port; the bang would have rattled windows in a thousand peasant villages, if the peasants of Malakatha had possessed any windows to rattle.

The towering walls of the palace dissolved into a dust storm, armies of shining bots into a barrage of molten metallic gobbets. Vast stores of munitions beneath the palace contributed a long series of secondary blasts to the initial thunder. The shattered ruins were quickly inundated by the waters of the Zot, and the surviving giant leeches, poison-footed blids, and carnivorous glongbars resumed their ancient sway over the interminable marshland.

When the news from Malakatha reached Earth — Drax's vaporization, the revolution that followed, the planet-wide carnival during which his torturers were each boiled, boned, diced, and scattered, to the cheers of the multitude — Balabanov and Marie-Elysée had a new topic for their pillow talk.

"How clever of you," she murmured, drowsy in the afterglow of love-making. Harsh African sunlight vibrated against carved fretwork screens, but did not penetrate the cool shadows of the private lair that Balabanov called his Lion Chamber.

"To have thin sheets of this Obliterol stuff folded into Vince's big belly," she went on. "Why, it's as if that great gross hairy egg of his had been made just for the purpose of holding a bomb. Where exactly did the surgeons put the stuff?"

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"Between the greater and lesser omentum," said Balabanov, "wherever that is. Also a microdetonator."

"And closing the catch on the medal sent the signal that touched off the explosion! How very, very clever of you. I'm sure after this coup you'll be First Secretary in no time. Hard on Vince, of course."

"I was sorry to lose the pompous oaf," mused the Second Secretary. "I've got nobody talks Xlu half so well. But what was he, after all? Just a rat from the Peoria slums. Well, by wiping out Drax he rid me of a nuisance and you of a husband. I reported that he sacrificed himself voluntarily, so in addition to his estate you'll get a posthumous medal and his pension."

"Send the pension to his parents," said Marie-Elysee with uncharacteristic generosity, kindled perhaps by the afterglow. "I believe they're quite poor. After all, dearest, I have you. Send them the medal, too. I certainly don't want the damn thing."

"I exist," murmured Balabanov, taking a firm grip on Vincent's widow's thin and elegant body, "only to serve you."

And he did, too — over and over and over. In that as in so many other things, he resembled his hero Talleyrand.

At first Vincent's parents were not much grieved by the news of his demise. He'd so thoroughly neglected them that his death seemed the end of somebody who was more than half a stranger.

All that changed when they learned that he'd blown himself up to free a whole world from the grip of a tyrant. Now they recalled the ideals of his childhood, his long-forgotten yearnings to liberate and uplift. Mrs. Khartoum found one of his school notebooks in some rubbish at the bottom of a cupboard, and for a long time she and her husband sat together, staring at a picture he'd drawn of himself with sword and torch.

"Imagine!" whispered his mother, beginning to weep. "All that time. Working himself up at UNIDIP, getting himself sent to Mala-whatever, just so he could carry out his dream of liberating oppressed humanity!"

"And I used to think," muttered Vincent's father in an agony of contrition, "that he was such a — such a — well, you know. Turd."

When the pension (fattened by Vincent's hero bonus) began arriving, they had another reason to bless him. At last they were able to move out of the Peoria Honeycomb and into a comfortable suburban villa, where at

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night the soft radioactive glow of Chicago illuminated the northern horizon.

In their new home they set up a kind of altar in a corner of the living room, displaying Vincent's portrait in his diplomatic uniform, along with his medal (Hero of Humanity, Second Class) and a scroll from the Office of Heraldry attesting to his sacrifice.

Their new neighbors were deeply impressed; the Khartoums achieved high status and became quite boring as they recounted over and over (with improvements) words of wisdom that supposedly had issued from the mouth of the young Vincent. Of the years between his childhood and his death — since they knew practically nothing about them — they said little.

"He wanted us to forget him," sobbed his mother, "so that we wouldn't grieve when he died. But of course, we never did."

This too became part of Vincent's legend, a legend that his parents, even though they'd made up most of it, deeply believed.

Their greatest honor came when the Xluan ambassador arrived, all the way from the embassy at New Great Zimbabwe, to lay a wreath before Vincent's portrait. He and his entourage — squat tripeds, cerise in color, with garlands of tentacles waving around the place where their necks would have been (if they'd had necks) — made an exotic show in the burbs of North Peoria and drew a gaping crowd.

The ambassador laid the wreath; then, addressing Mr. and Mrs. Khartoum, he declared, *"!!U nyuknyuk ^zu u|du."*

He'd been studying a recent Xluan translation of Shakespeare, and had chosen for Vincent an appropriate epitaph from *Macbeth*: "Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it."

"I dunno what you said," replied Mr. Khartoum, "but you can say that again."

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Heather Lindsley's story "Just Do It" appeared in our July 2006 issue. She has also published stories in Strange Horizons, Talking Back, *and she has also written and directed several plays. At the moment, she lives in London where she is finishing up a novel based on Norse mythology. Her new story for us also deals with mythology, though perhaps not in the most serious of ways....*

Atalanta Loses at the Interpantheonic Trivia Bee

By Heather Lindsley

ATALANTA WAS DOING sit-ups when the goddesses pounded on her door.

"Two hundred thirty-seven," she said with the exhale, then "Who is it?"

The response was a chorus that sounded to Atalanta like *Athenphroditemis.*

"Oh," said Atalanta to herself. "Oh, this cannot be good."

"We heard that," the chorus said.

"Sorry," said Atalanta as she opened the door. A blink-inducing divine glow — along with Athena's spear, Artemis' bow, and Aphrodite's cleavage — made her add quickly, "Oh Great Goddesses, how may I serve you?"

"Trivia bee," said Athena. "We need a human on the team."

"It's in the rules," said Aphrodite.

"Stupid rule," said Artemis.

"Trivia bee?" said Atalanta. "Uh, that isn't really my thing. Shouldn't you ask, I don't know, Medea? Medea's smart."

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"She creeps me out," said Aphrodite.

"And she's a sore loser," said Artemis.

"And then we wouldn't be the A Team," said Athena.

"The what?" said Atalanta.

"The A Team," Athena said. "Our team name. Every team in the trivia bee has a name."

"What about Arachne?" Atalanta ventured, immediately regretting it. She didn't like the look in Athena's storm-gray eyes. There could be lightning.

"She's...indisposed," Athena said.

"Just say you'll do it, Atalanta," said Aphrodite. Atalanta had a hard time separating Aphrodite's charm from the threat.

"Fine, I'll do it," Atalanta said. "When is it?"

"Now," said Athena.

"Welcome, gods and goddesses, deities and designers, demons and humans, and spirits of all ages, to the Seventeenth Millennial Interpantheonic Trivia Bee!" The Sphinx stalked across an unadorned stage, flicking her tail and the microphone's cord into the same sinuous arc. "I'm glad to see so many teams participating in what's sure to be the most exciting charity event of the season."

"What, this?" said Atalanta. The hall could have been a junior high cafetorium if not for its massive scale and the absence of stale institutional food odors.

"I know it doesn't look like much," Athena said, testing a dry erase marker on the white board their team was issued when they registered, "but really, it's very prestigious."

"Uh huh." Atalanta rapped her knuckles against her molded plastic chair. "Stackable. Very nice."

"Forget the hall," Artemis said. "Forget the chairs. Forget that sticky spot on the floor — "

"What is that sticky spot?" said Atalanta, sliding her sandaled foot away.

"Probably blood. This hall gets used for a lot of stuff. Ritual sacrifices, showdowns between Good and Evil, potlucks." Artemis leaned closer to the pale green flecked linoleum floor and examined the stain. "Maybe it's gravy."

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"Let's call it gravy," said Atalanta.

"Fine, it's gravy. Now forget the gravy. Just remember it's all about winning."

The Sphinx moved to the edge of the stage. "Before we get started, I'd like to take a moment to welcome back the winner of the last three Interpantheonic Trivia Bees, the Eye of the Tigris: Inanna, Nanna, Utu, and Enheduanna!"

A knot of supporters at the back of the hall broke into enthusiastic applause. The Sumerian sky deities and their priestess rose from their circle of plastic chairs and hefted last year's trophy in the air, eliciting more cheers.

"Oh, please." Aphrodite rolled her eyes. "What a bunch of show-offs."

"You're just jealous of Inanna's breasts," Athena said.

"Am not," said Aphrodite.

"So," the Sphinx said, "let's have an evening of good fun, good sportsmanship, and remember — " here she indulged in a particularly wide smile, "the decisions of the judges are final."

"Look," said Athena, pointing past the Sumerians, "Dad's playing."

"Who's with him?" Artemis asked. "I can't see around those Mayans. What is it with agriculture gods and their corn headdresses?"

Athena had to lean back to see. "Apollo and Hermes."

"And who's their human?" asked Artemis.

Aphrodite answered without looking. "Hippomenes."

"Who?" said Athena and Artemis in unison.

"Hippomenes." Aphrodite nudged Atalanta. "You've met him. He's cute, don't you think?"

"Eh." Atalanta shrugged. "Not really my type. Kinda scrawny. And he throws like a girl."

"You throw like a girl," said Athena.

"I throw like a...." Atalanta was about to say *goddess* but remembered that hubris didn't go over well with this crowd. "I throw like a *woman*," she finished.

"Nice save," said Artemis.

"And now," the Sphinx cleared her throat, "the first question. What is the speed of light in a vacuum expressed as Egyptian royal cubits per second?"

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* * *

"Starting with the easy ones, as usual," said Apollo. He scrawled numbers across the white board.

"Yeah," said Zeus, curling his beard around a finger. "Easy ones. Hey, check out the cubits on the Swedish metal bikini team over there."

"Those are Valkyries," said Hermes. "Don't mess with them."

"Why not? They look like they'd appreciate a good bolt."

"Focus," said Apollo as he wrote down the last few digits.

"Why?" Zeus leaned back in his chair. "You've got it covered."

"Not if you keep distracting me," Apollo said. "I almost forgot to carry the one."

"Where's Atalanta?" said Hippomenes. "I can't find her."

"Over there," said Hermes, "on the other side of the Sumerians and behind the Mayans. See?" Hippomenes just nodded, not taking his eyes off Atalanta once he'd found her in the crowd. "I told you Aphrodite would get her here. Now, are you ready?"

Hippomenes turned back to Hermes. "Are you sure this is going to work?"

"How could she resist?" said Hermes.

"I don't know, kid," said Zeus, "This is kind of extreme, don't you think?"

"I have to do it," said Hippomenes. "My heart belongs to her."

"Yeah," said Zeus, "but there's no need to be so literal about it...."

Hippomenes looked at Hermes and took a deep breath. "Let's go."

"This may hurt a little at first," Hermes said.

Hippomenes put his hands defensively over his chest. "How much is 'a little'?"

"Sorry, I'm just messing with you," said Hermes. "It won't hurt at all now." He pushed his hand into Hippomenes' chest. "But I can't guarantee it won't hurt like hell later."

Hermes pulled out a golden apple and held it for a moment before passing it to Hippomenes. Hippomenes turned it in his hands, mesmerized by a surface glowing like rosy liquid gold in sunlight, just transparent enough to reveal the heart within.

"I didn't know it would look like this," he said, swaying a little.

"Are you sure you want to give it up?" Zeus asked.

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Hippomenes didn't answer. He just walked to the edge of their circle and rolled the apple away.

"OOOH," said Aphrodite when she saw the rolling apple. "Shiny!"

"No!" shouted Athena and Artemis as they tackled Aphrodite.

"Ow! Cut it out!" said Aphrodite.

"No golden apples!" Artemis insisted.

"You remember what happened last time," said Athena.

"Yes, I remember what happened last time, it was a ten-year war, of course I remember! You two harpies are never going to let me forget it."

"Harpies?" said Artemis.

"That's a little harsh, don't you think?" Athena said.

"Yeah," said Artemis.

"Whatever," said Aphrodite. "Anyway, the golden apple is obviously for Atalanta."

"How do you know that?" said Artemis.

"My name's on it." Atalanta took the golden apple Aphrodite offered her.

"There's more writing on the back," said Athena.

Atalanta turned the apple. "*You stand on the peaks of this pulse,*" she read. "*You live in these chambers.*" She thrust the apple at Aphrodite, who refused to take it back.

Artemis peered at the apple. "Yep, that's a heart."

"Anatomically correct, too," said Athena. "I mean, jamming it into an apple has distorted it a little, but it's all there."

"It's warm," said Atalanta. "And beating."

"It's a beautiful gesture," said Aphrodite. "Don't you think?"

"It's Round Two," the Sphinx announced before Atalanta could answer, "and with a twenty-three-way tie it's still anybody's game. Let's raise the level of difficulty. The question: what does human birth feel like?"

"Oh, no way," said Artemis.

"That's ambiguous," protested Athena. "Do they mean the feeling of passing through a birth canal, or the feeling of pushing something through a birth canal?"

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"Either way," said Aphrodite, "ick."

"Well?" Artemis poked Atalanta in the ribs.

Atalanta looked up from the apple. "Well what?"

"What's the answer?" said Athena.

"What was the question?" Atalanta asked, her eyes back on the apple.

"Hippomenes?" Apollo said.

"Hey, don't look at me," he answered.

"Just put 'Like having your skull cracked open,'" said Zeus.

"Can you see what Team Holy Holy Holy is writing?" Hermes said. "The chick in the blue shawl looks like she's on it."

"Number one, that's cheating," Apollo said. "And number two, no, I can't see."

"Just put the skull thing," said Hermes, turning his attention back to Hippomenes. "They're gonna be a tight fit. Better exhale first."

"I have," said Hippomenes.

"If you can talk you haven't exhaled enough," said Hermes.

"Fine," huffed Hippomenes through collapsed cheeks.

"Oh, come on, you're not even trying! Do you want to win her or not?"

Hippomenes blew out the last of the air in his lungs.

"There! Got 'em!" Hermes gave another golden apple to Hippomenes, who staggered forward and tossed the apple with less accuracy than his previous effort. Hermes redirected the apple with a flick of his wrist, maneuvering it past divine toes, claws, and paws until it bumped into the dusty sandals of Hippomenes' beloved.

Artemis poked at the apple with one finger. "What is that in there, a sponge?"

"Okay, why would he send a sponge?" said Aphrodite. "What's romantic about a sponge?"

"He's trying to be romantic?" asked Artemis with surprise.

"It's not a sponge." Atalanta showed the apple to Athena.

"*You before air*," Athena read. "Lungs."

"What's romantic about lungs?" said Artemis.

"Exactly," said Atalanta. "What kind of guy sends body parts?" Her

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eyes widened with the horror of a new idea. "Hey, what if they're not even his? What if these are ex-lover body parts?"

"They are not ex-lover body parts," declared Aphrodite. "They're his. Given as a pledge of eternal love. I can tell. You should thank him."

"I should find him and kick his ass. Unless of course his ass is already rolling its way over here encased in a golden apple."

"That's silly," said Aphrodite. "Why would he send his ass?"

"Why would he send his heart and his lungs?" said Atalanta. "It's just weird."

"It's poetic," Aphrodite said.

"It's creepy," said Atalanta.

"Would you two keep it down?" hissed Athena. "I can't hear the Sphinx."

" — British pop sensation achieved success by contracting with Ah Puch the Destroyer?" asked the Sphinx.

"Oh, great," said Artemis. "A gimme for the Mayans."

Athena looked at Aphrodite.

"Typical," Aphrodite pouted. "You don't listen when I tell you the fifteenth multiplicative perfect number is thirty-nine, but along comes a question about the Spice Girls and you just assume I have the answer at my perfectly manicured fingertips."

"So," Athena said, "it's the Spice Girls?"

Aphrodite sighed. "Yes it's the Spice Girls. Of course it's the Spice Girls."

"Are you sure it's not Petula Clark?" Apollo asked.

"It's the Spice Girls, I'm telling you," said Zeus.

"I don't know, I think it might be Petula Clark," said Apollo.

"Look, I know it's the Spice Girls, because I put a lot of time and effort into ranking them according to who was most deserving of my thunderous Olympic ambrosia. First was — "

"Okay okay, it's the Spice Girls," said Apollo. "Look, I'm writing it down. Just stop talking about your thunderous Olympic whatever."

"Ambrosia," said Zeus. "Nectar of the God, baby."

"So Hippomenes," Hermes said, "you might want to get that image out of your head before we do this."

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"I'm trying," said Hippomenes. "Really."

"And it's best if you're thinking of her," Hermes said. He rested his palm on Hippomenes' temple. "But, uh, it might send the wrong impression if you're thinking of her naked."

"Hey, I wanna see," said Zeus, grabbing Hippomenes' skull in his meaty palm.

"Ow!" said Hippomenes.

"Wow," said Zeus. "No wonder you're tossing body parts."

"Just ignore him," Hermes said, prodding Zeus away, "and think happy thoughts." He sunk his hand wrist-deep into Hippomenes' forehead and pulled out a third golden apple. The apple flickered below its surface.

"What is that?" said Zeus. "Lightning?"

"Mostly thoughts," said Hermes as he put the apple in Hippomenes' hands, "with a few dreams mixed in to keep it interesting."

Hippomenes moved blindly toward Atalanta. Hermes grabbed him by the tunic.

"Just send her the apple, kid."

Hippomenes stood dazed at the edge of the circle, his eyes locked on Atalanta. He didn't throw the apple — it seemed to leap from his hand, then twisted through the crowd without any guidance from Hermes.

"So," Apollo whispered to Hermes, "heart, lungs, brain, all thrown away. What's he living on?"

"Hope," said Hermes.

"What," said Zeus, "that shabby little thing at the bottom of Pandora's box?"

"Yep," said Hermes.

"And what's he thinking with?" said Apollo.

Hermes tipped his head toward his belt.

"So — the usual," Zeus said.

"*No thought without you in it*," Atalanta read. "*No dream that isn't you.*"

"That's so romantic," said Aphrodite.

"It's scary," said Atalanta.

"It's charming," said Aphrodite.

"It's obsessive," said Atalanta.

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"Shut up," said Artemis and Athena together.

" — cow does tri-tip come from?" finished the Sphinx.

"What?" said Athena.

"Wait, I know this, it's the saddle," Artemis said. "I mean, if it's the same as venison."

"Is it the same as venison?" said Athena.

"Probably. Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, if that's all we've got...." Athena wrote SADDLE on the white board.

The Sphinx called time and the teams lifted their boards.

"Dammit," said Artemis. "Sirloin. That's what I meant."

"What's that on the Sumerian board, under the answer?" said Aphrodite.

"It's a diagram of a cow," said Athena, "with a little star where tri-tip comes from."

"No way," said Artemis.

"Were we supposed to do that?" said Aphrodite.

"No," said Athena. "They're just showing off. They've been illustrating their answers since the beginning. They drew a pretty good Ben Franklin in Round Four."

"Unbelievable," grumbled Artemis.

" — and now," said the Sphinx. "with the scores tallied I'm happy to announce the winners of Seventeenth Millennial Interpantheonic Trivia Bee...for the fourth time running, the Eye of the Tigris!"

"Dammit, dammit, dammit," said Artemis. "Dammit. I thought we had them this year. That's it, I need to go hunt something. You'd better come with me," she said, nudging Athena. "Nobody needs a pissy war goddess on the loose."

"I am not," Athena flashed, "pissy."

"Whatever," said Artemis. "A little sylvan slaughter will do you good. Let's go shoot something in the sirloin." She waved goodbye to Atalanta and whispered to Athena, "Next time we're bringing Medea. I don't care how creepy she is."

Atalanta waved back, then stooped to gather the three golden apples in her arms.

"What are you going to do with those?" Aphrodite said.

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"Give them back," Atalanta called over her shoulder as she stalked off through the dispersing crowd.

Hermes appeared at Aphrodite's side. "Well," he said, "the kid's on his own now. Do you think he can pull it off?"

Aphrodite stared after Atalanta's determined stomp. "She's going to make applesauce out of him."

"Wanna watch?"

"No." Aphrodite said, turning away. "You know how I hate to lose."

"I THINK THESE belong to you." Atalanta thrust the apples at Hippomenes, who was a bit more clearheaded now.

"No," he said, pushing the apples back, "they really don't."

"Well, they don't belong to me, either."

"They're in your hands. That means they're yours."

"Take them," said Atalanta.

"No."

Atalanta knelt down and began to place the apples carefully on the ground. Hippomenes took the fact that she didn't just drop them as an encouraging sign.

"That won't make any difference," he said. "Even walking away won't make any difference. They're yours. They'll always be yours."

Atalanta stood up, one apple still in her hand. She stared at him, her expression incomprehensible to Hippomenes, a man unacquainted with the more extreme forms of female anger.

Atalanta drew back her arm and hurled the apple at him.

The golden apple shattered against Hippomenes' chest, vanishing into a gust that drove the breath into him. He shot the breath back out, letting it carry the only thing he wanted to say.

"I love you," he said.

"You don't even know me."

"Yes, I do."

"Prove it," she said.

She realized his intention too late, and when she lunged for the flickering apple she clasped his hand instead. She held on for a moment,

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the apple in his hand, his hand in hers. He smiled. She jerked away, arms wrapped around her head as she ran.

Hippomenes lobbed the golden apple. It followed Atalanta's darting path until it hit the crown of her head and disappeared in a cascade of sparks. She would have cursed, but was overwhelmed by the sensation of knowing clearly and precisely what another person thought of her.

"Wow," she said, staring into space.

"Oh, no," said Hippomenes as he ran to Atalanta. "Are you okay?" He held her shoulders, frightened at her dazed look. "Oh. Oh no. That didn't turn you into me, did it? No. No no no no, that would be bad. I don't want that. I just wanted you to know what I thought. Atalanta?" He shook her. "Atalanta?"

She looked up at him, eyes focused at last and expression distinctly hers.

"You really think my front teeth are a little crooked?" she asked.

"That's what you take away?" Hippomenes said in disbelief. "You get the sum of my thoughts about you and that's the one you take away?"

"I like that one. It makes you seem less, I don't know, crazy. Like you still have some sense of perspective."

"Well, yeah, your teeth are a little crooked. And, you know, you're not exactly graceful. And frankly I think your left br — "

"Yeah, okay, I got it."

"Sorry," he said.

"And you really think this could be a terrible mistake but you want to do it anyway?"

"Well, yeah," Hippomenes said. "But anything could be a terrible mistake."

They stood over the last apple in silence, watching it pulse.

"What are we going to do with this?" Atalanta finally said.

Hippomenes didn't answer. Atalanta picked the apple up. She stared at it.

"It's very pretty," she said. "Beautiful, really."

"Thank you," he said.

She stepped toward him, apple resting upright in her palm. She held it out, just inches from his chest.

"It's probably safer in there," she said.

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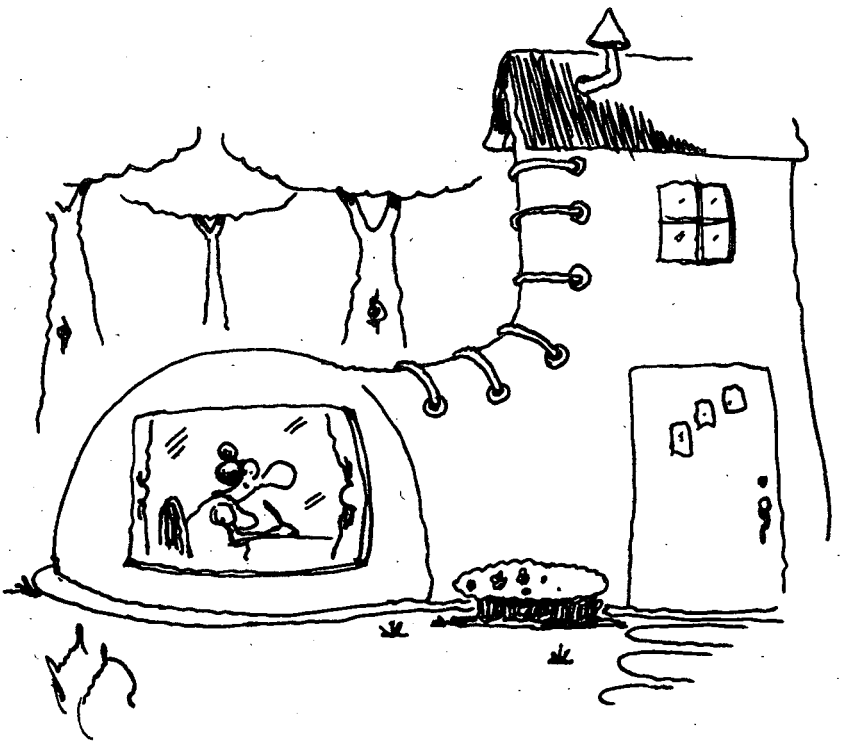
"Probably," he said.

Atalanta didn't know if Hippomenes was reaching for her or for the apple, but in the end her arms were tight around him, the rosy golden apple crushed into nothing between them.

When she kissed him he tasted tart, and sweet, a welcome crisp autumn after a long summer, and the slight metallic tang of heart's blood was easy to ignore.

And if afterward his heartbeat had the faintest echo, she never noticed. It was too close to her own.



"Dear Mr. Bigfoot, I read your ad in the personals and I think we might be compatible."

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John Langan's past contributions — including "Mr. Gaunt," "On Skua Island," and "Tutorial" — are due to be published in a story collection next year. His new story is a grim and hard-hitting tale that would probably get an "R" rating from the late Jack Valenti and his MPAA board. It probably says just enough about this story to mention that it will be reprinted next year in Wastelands: Stories of Life After Apocalypse, *which is edited by our own Assistant Editor, John Joseph Adams.*

Episode Seven: Last Stand Against the Pack In the Kingdom of the Purple Flowers

By John Langan

"There's a whole lot of hate left on this world, Spiderman."

—Samuel R. Delany, *The Einstein Intersection*

"Come On Down, Make the Stand."

—The Alarm, "The Stand"

AFTER THREE DAYS AND NIGHTS on the run —

— during which they slept in thirty-, sixty-, and ninety-minute snatches, in the backs of large cars and SUVs, in a hotel lobby, in a sporting goods store at one end of a mall —

— they managed to pull ahead of the Pack —

— who had been too close from the start and drawn closer than that, despite Wayne's traps, all of which were clever and a few ingenious and the least of which thinned the Pack by two or three; until Wayne succeeded in luring them onto the walkway between the foodcourt and the mall's front entrance, where he

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detonated something that not only dropped the floor out from beneath the Pack, but brought the roof down, too, raining shards of glass like so many economy-sized guillotines — Jackie had wanted to stay and finish the survivors, but Wayne had declared it was still too dangerous and hauled her out the door —

— cross the Bridge —

— too congested with cars for them to take the Jeep Cherokee Wayne had navigated up the surprisingly empty stretch of Route 9 between the mall and the Mid-Hudson Bridge, which had made them debate the pros and cons of continuing north along this side of the Hudson until they reached the next bridge, which might be clear or might not (for once, Wayne couldn't make up his mind), until Jackie insisted they might as well cross here as cross anywhere: there would be plenty of cars on the other side, and if they didn't do something, they were going to squander their lead and face the Pack on *their* terms (which, aside from that first, terrible introduction, they'd succeeded in avoiding) — so they abandoned the Jeep, shouldered the backpacks, heavy as ever (so much for having rested), and (the Bridge shifting underfoot in the wind that hummed through its cables like a choir warming up) wound their way through a labyrinth of vehicles jammed, it seemed, into every possible configuration , their interiors choked with the oversized, thick-stemmed purple flowers Jackie and Wayne had found inside the vast majority of vehicles they'd encountered thus far, wound around steering wheels, gearshifts, and pedals (the windows talced with violet pollen), which made operating the cars a problem they had neither tools or time to solve — there was a pickup whose cab was empty, but it was boxed against the railing by a trio of smaller cars, as if they'd brought it to bay there —

— set up camp on the other shore —

— on a ledge overlooking the spot where the Bridge slotted into the steep hills on the western shore of the Hudson — Wayne had noticed the shelf of rock as they followed the road up and to the right, past another cluster of cars full of purple flowers, pointing it out to Jackie — when they reached a place where the ledge was accessible from the road, up a steep path blocked by a gate Wayne was certain he could open, he had steered them toward it (even though Jackie's

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legs trembled at the prospect of more and harder climbing), urging her on, murmuring encouragements, praise, until they had gained the top of the path and Wayne had sprung the lock on the gate, let them through, and snapped the lock closed again behind them — Jackie had followed him as he picked his way across the rocks littering the shelf; no more than fifteen feet at its widest, she guestimated; the Bridge returning to view, and then Wayne had held up his hand as if he were some kind of native guide signaling the rest of the safari and said that this would do —

— and were preparing an ambush —

— Wayne starting back along the ledge almost as soon as they'd shucked their backpacks, taking with him only the bulky black canvas bag that Jackie thought of sometimes as his bag of tricks and sometimes as his utility belt, and one of the pistols, leaving the other guns with her: the rifle whose name she couldn't remember but which Wayne had been very excited to find in the sporting goods store, and the two remaining pistols, one of which had come from Wayne's father's safe, the other from an empty police cruiser — "You don't have to cover me," he'd said, "but pay attention," and she had, sitting with her bag propped against the backpacks, the rifle resting against the dome of her belly, as Wayne retraced their route down the hill to the Bridge and then out onto it, to set up some trap that had occurred to him, maybe two if there were time, till he was lost to view, obscured by the lean of the hill opposite her.

Jackie —

— Jacqueline Marie DiSalvo: twenty years old; five foot six, tall as her (most likely dead) father; she didn't know how many pounds anymore, since stepping on scales hadn't been at the top of her list of priorities for some time, now; her hair dark brown, long enough not to look short; her eyes brown, as well; her features carefully proportioned, (once, her [dead] father had described them to her as prim, which she hadn't been sure how to take); her skin less tanned than she would have expected, considering all the time they'd spent outdoors this past month: much of it at night, true, and there had been almost a solid week of rain in the middle of it, but still; wearing an extra-large men's white cotton T-shirt, gray sweatpants, white cotton athletic socks, and knock-off Birkenstocks that were comfortable but growing too tight: again, shoe

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shopping not a priority when you were running (or waddling, in her case) for your life — five weeks ago, she had been thirty-five days less pregnant, six and a half instead of nearly eight months "along" (her [most likely dead] doctor's favorite euphemism for pregnancy, as if carrying a child were an exotic vacation): a difference that meant, practically speaking, a smaller stomach, smaller breasts, smaller everything; smaller her, who didn't tire quite so quickly; who didn't feel so out of breath all the time; who didn't sleep well but better than lately, when comfort had taken the last train out; who didn't need to stop to pee all the time, while Wayne stood guard, his gun out, his eyes sweeping whatever landscape they were in for the inevitable (re)appearance of the Pack —

— sat waiting for Wayne —

— Wayne Anthony Miller: twenty years old, two days younger than Jackie, in fact: she born on the third of July, he the fifth; six foot three; maybe one hundred and seventy pounds, not yet grown out of adolescent gangliness (his [most likely dead] mother's term, which he'd overheard her use at a New Year's party and which he'd confessed to Jackie left him feeling betrayed in some fundamental way); his hands and feet large, hung from long, skinny arms and legs that attached to a long, skinny torso; his hair grown long, a light brown that had been blond until his teens, framing a broad, square face with a small nose, narrow eyes, and generous mouth; he was wearing the same pair of jeans that had seen him through the last month, and which were little worse for wear (what an ad campaign: "Levi's: We'll Get You Through the End of Civilization: Rated Number One in Post-Apocalyptic Scenarios"), with a red plaid shirt open over a gray T-shirt emblazoned with Batman's black bat emblem, and Doc Martens — five weeks ago, he had been working at the Barnes and Noble just south of the Bridge on the other side of the river and spending more of each paycheck than he should have at the comic book store in the plaza, there; his Associates Degree in Liberal Arts from Dutchess County Community College completed the previous semester; his future, which revolved around dreams of writing one of the Batman titles, still, as he liked to put it, a work in progress (this back when the future had extended further forward than the next twelve hours, and been somewhat more complex, yet also somewhat simpler, than trying to locate food and defensible shelter).

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The sun was hot —

— roasting was a better word for it; although there was a substantial breeze blowing up from the river — Jackie supposed that the exposed rock around her, a grayish, sharp stuff that she should have been able to name but whose identity apparently lay in that part of her memory marked, "No Longer Useful," amplified the heat, which wasn't completely oppressive (soon, it would be, she would be panting like a dog with it, most likely feel the urge to strip down to her underwear, but for the moment it radiated through her pleasantly).

Later —

— the better part of two hours; what had he been doing out there? —

— Wayne returned —

— waving to her as he walked off the Bridge; she waved back —

— long enough to pick up some rope —

— digging it out of his backpack, a hefty coil that looked like something a mountain climber might use and that he had been happy to find in a hardware store two weeks ago, which Jackie hadn't understood, since the rope looked pretty heavy and she didn't see the point in either of them taking on any more weight than was absolutely necessary — already, Wayne was carrying more than his fair share to compensate for her; she didn't want him exhausting himself because of an inability to pass on everything that might prove useful someday — she hadn't said anything out loud, though, and the addition of the rope seemed to have made no significant difference to him —

— and return to the Bridge —

— where he strung the rope across the road, running it back and forth and back and forth between a pair of the Bridge's support cables, weaving a kind of improvised web that Jackie thought would slow down the weakest members of the Pack for about half a second, and that the leader and its (hers? his?) companions would be through in no time at all.

When he was done with his final trap —

— which didn't look any more impressive once it was finished than it had when Jackie had realized what

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it was; although there was more of it than she had expected, a dozen, maybe fifteen strands that Wayne had layered according to a design she couldn't discern, so that some strands ran a foot or more behind the others — she hadn't exactly dozed while he'd constructed it: she'd kept her eyes open throughout the process, but her mind had wandered, as it had so often in the last day and a half, to the baby, which had gone from what she referred to as its daily calisthenics to complete stillness, not moving at all that she could feel (and, at this stage, she could feel a lot) for roughly thirty-six hours, now, which might have been entirely normal for all she knew: there was a rather dramatic lack of obstetricians in these parts (ha ha) and while Wayne knew a surprising amount about all sorts of things, his expertise tended toward the ultraviolent and not so much the whole miracle-of-life end of the spectrum — the best he could do was hear her concerns, shrug, and tell her not to worry about it, advice she'd already given herself and that was growing impossible to follow — she could feel panic gathering inside her, coalescing into a storm that would wash her away in a torrent of tears and screaming, because the child inside her was dead, she was carrying a dead baby — all right, to be honest, her mind hadn't wandered so much as gone directly to her anxiety and watched it growing — the point was, she wasn't sure if Wayne had rigged his web with any of the explosives (proper and improvised) that stuffed his bag of tricks, or if he had other plans for his oversized Cat's Cradle —

— he came back —

— and a good thing, too, because the sun had dipped behind the hill to her back, and though the sky overhead was still blue, it was that darker blue that would spend the next couple of hours shading steadily darker, into that indigo that a month of looking up at the night sky had shown her was the actual color against which the stars shone, and while the Pack had more than proved their ability to appear at any time of day, there was no doubting they preferred to move after the sun was down, and although Jackie had trained with the pistols, had opened up on one of the Pack at terrifyingly close range (it had scampered off, unhurt), she'd had a single lesson with the rifle (whose name was on the tip of her mind) with it unloaded, and had no faith in her ability to get off more than a single shot, if that, which was not saying anything about her ability to kill or even hit her target, so when Wayne tied the final knot in his rope

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barrier and started up the road, relief suffused her —

— and built a fire —

— using wood he collected from the trees along the path up to the ledge, a heavy armload that he arranged into a larger fire than she would have thought wise, an almost inexplicable lapse of Wayne's part — unless he wanted to be visible; if so, it was a new strategy for him: his previous traps had depended on misdirection, on leading the Pack into thinking the two of them were someplace they were safely away from, which had become increasingly difficult as the Pack adapted to Wayne's tactics — frankly, Jackie had been shocked that the mall trap had succeeded as well as it had, because it had been so obvious, as obvious as any of his early efforts, so much so that the Pack must have assumed (if you could apply such a word to them; though they evidently had some process of cognition) it couldn't possibly be a set-up, and so had walked right into the middle of it — strictly speaking, there was no need for a fire, not yet, heat poured up from the ledge and would do so well into the night, while the Bridge's lights, a row of flame-shaped bulbs tracing the arc of each of the suspension cables, had blinked on as the daylight ebbed (one of those intermittent events that indexed the random status of what she already was referring to herself as the Old World's machineries), their bright glow traversing the spectrum from blue to red and back down to blue again, their light sufficient for Jackie to read her battered copy of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* if she wanted to (she didn't; she felt vaguely guilty about it, but she was too tired [and — tell the truth — afraid of what the book might tell her about the baby's stillness]) — when you came right down to it, the fire was a beacon and a goad, Wayne's way of thumbing his nose at whatever members of the Pack might have survived the mall and guiding them across the Bridge — as she reclined against her backpack and accepted the peanut butter bagel Wayne passed her, Jackie thought, *This really is it, our last stand; after four weeks, we're making our stand.*

They ate dinner in silence —

— the way they did practically everything in silence, the last week or so — formerly, Wayne had been a talker of epic proportions, the kind of person you don't start a conversation with unless you've got, say, three days to spare, which Jackie had found mostly

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charming, because a lot of what he had to say was funny and interesting, and if she rolled her eyes, it was only when he started talking about whatever comic book he was currently infatuated with, which he could and would do in microscopic, mind-numbing detail — comics never had interested her, the secret exploits of men playing dress-up in what was essentially a consequence-free arena just hadn't appealed; although the length and depth of description and analysis Wayne lavished on them prompted her to second-guess herself once in a while; now, she wished she had read some of the titles Wayne had rhapsodized about (*The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One* [but not *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, that was so much overpriced crap] and *The Sandman* and *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* [whose title she wished she found funnier]) or at least paid better attention to his lectures on them, because they might have helped her understand what had happened to Wayne in the last month, since the bottom had dropped out of the world, the least manifestation of which was the drying up of the torrent of words that poured from his mouth, and the most dramatic example of which was...was crazy —

— then cleaned the guns —

— one at a time, Wayne stripping each of the pistols in turn while Jackie trained the rifle on the rope barrier, then the rifle as Jackie aimed the policeman's automatic — she could have broken each of the weapons down, cleaned and greased them, herself: Wayne had insisted she learn in case anything happened to him (which was a joke: did he really imagine that, at this stage, big and awkward as she was, she'd get anywhere without him? It was almost funny: the hugely pregnant woman, a smoking gun in either hand, fighting off the Pack), but the thick smell of the grease nauseated her, so she stood (reclined, actually) guard and let Wayne do things the way he not-so-secretly wanted to —

— and settled down for the night —

— to wait and sleep, him taking the first watch, her the second — after she'd unrolled her sleeping bag and used her feet to push off her sandals, she looked at Wayne, sitting on the other side of the fire (to which he'd added even more wood, keeping it hot and bright), and asked, "When will they be here?" to which Wayne answered, "Hard to tell. If we're

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lucky, late morning, early afternoon," which surprised her: ambush or not, last stand or not, she would have expected that, if the Pack hadn't put in an appearance by first light, maybe a little later, the two of them would abandon their position, which, for all its advantages in terms of height ("Control the high ground," how often had Wayne repeated that?) was a dead end: if the Pack made it through whatever Wayne had prepared for them on the Bridge, not to mention his improvised web, and surged up the road till they reached the path to the ledge, she and Wayne would be trapped (violating another of his mantras, "Always have a way out"); better, she thought, to keep their options open and retreat, trust Wayne's ingenuity to thin the Pack further — all of which she said to him, and none of which made a difference: "This is our best chance," he said, and while she argued, appealing to her mantra, "He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day," Wayne was unmovable, and anyway her eyelids were sliding down, so she abandoned her argument until daylight and slid into her sleeping bag.

Jackie's sleep was light, troubled —

— because sleeping soundly was impossible at this stage of pregnancy; not on a rock shelf in a sleeping bag, at least; and because her dreams were vivid and disturbing; no surprise, so *What to Expect* assured her: pregnant women were subject to all kinds of anxiety dreams, a tendency compounded on her part by the last month's events, the long struggle to keep on the move and ahead of the Pack, which had given her unconscious a whole new vocabulary of unease and terror —

[— she was on that stretch of Route 9 where all the cars, two, three dozen, had come to a halt pretty much simultaneously, with the exception of a black SUV that had crumpled the trunk of the red sedan in front of it — she and Wayne peering through the cars' windows at their interiors, every one crowded by purple flowers, anywhere from one to four per vehicle, stalks thick and twisting as snakes, blossoms the size of sunflowers, a kind of plant she'd never seen, and while she was no expert, botany was a hobby — each flower an accumulation of overlapping petals, vaguely rose-like except that each petal was four to six inches long, edges ragged, almost serrated, and a uniform eggplant hue; the flowers' centers obscured by clusters of closed petals that suggested mouths pursed for a kiss, an

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effect she found sufficiently unsettling to drop her eyes to the stems, parsley-green, woody, covered in coarse hairs, fan-shaped leaves tiny, almost vestigial — Jackie had studied the plants, looped around steering wheels, gearshifts, headrests, door handles, pedals, one another, through windows dusted with violet pollen, each car a separate terrarium, thinking that none of this made any sense: there was no way for this size of plant to survive in this kind of environment, deprived, as far as she could see, of food and water — before Wayne could stop her, she had grabbed the door handle of the car she was standing next to so she could open it and take a cutting from the flower whose blossom pressed against the window like a child's face peering out; but the stem held the door closed with surprising force, so that the best she could manage was opening the door a crack, not enough to reach the plant, just sufficient for a small cloud of pollen to puff out — then Wayne was there, pulling her back from the car onto the shoulder, though not before she'd inhaled some of the pollen, filling her nose with the astringent smell of lavender, which lingered for the rest of the day despite the fit of violent sneezing it precipitated — she had been annoyed at Wayne, not only for being so patronizing, but for reminding her that there wasn't much point in her taking a cutting — what was she going to do with it? She could put it under a microscope if they could find one, and then what? She was a college junior majoring in Biology and minoring in Psych: about the best she'd be able to do if she could study a slide of a purple flower would be to identify it as a plant — it wasn't as if she'd be able to offer any insight into their situation — she had stalked away from him as best she could, and answered his regular questions of how she was feeling with the same monosyllable, "Fine," which was pretty much true, except for the lavender smell (but that night she'd had dreams in which she was driving and her skin, which was incredibly itchy, so much so that she was finding it difficult to concentrate on the road, began to crumble beneath her fingertips, becoming powdery, dusty, and suddenly all of her was on the verge of coming apart — for a moment, she was aware of her entire body drying, loosening, streams of dust pouring from her hands, her chin, her fingers raining down over the steering wheel, her body dissolving against the seat, her feet reducing to powder in her shoes — she had time for the panicked thought that she couldn't breathe, then that didn't matter anymore, and she collapsed — and woke with heart pounding, the baby

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kicking in response to her excitement, but that was fine, fine, because it meant she was still here, still in her body — for a good half hour, she ran her hands back and forth over her skin, reassuring herself with every pimple, every blemish, every strand of unwashed hair, that she was whole, not coming apart — Wayne must have noticed, but he remained silent, and another week would elapse before Jackie had gained sufficient distance from the dream and its sensations to narrate it to him — but, to her surprise, he didn't have an interpretation ready, just grunted and didn't refer to it again)] —

[— that dream sliding into one in which she was in her parents' den with Glenn, who was drunk again...still: he'd brought the bottle of gin and the bottle of tonic out beside the couch so he wouldn't have to travel so far to refill his glass, along with a bucket of ice from which he scooped half-melted cubes to deposit in his drink when it became too warm — the end of the world, or something close, and he'd spent pretty much all of it submerged in alcohol, because who was going to tell him not to? Her parents hadn't returned from the trip to Shop Rite that shouldn't have taken them more than two hours, three at most, and that they'd left for twenty-two, no, twenty-four hours before, kissing her and ignoring Glenn (as they had ever since they'd learned the news of her pregnancy), promising to be back soon, a promise something had prevented them from keeping, which had her nervous but not as upset as she should have been; she wasn't done thinking they might yet appear, despite what the TV had shown before the channels started blinking off, whatever horror they'd been covering replaced by the tranquility of an electric blue screen — when Jackie climbed the stairs to the living room and looked out its picture window, all she saw was their slice of neighborhood, the same as ever: no fires, no riots, no people dying from whatever it was was boiling the flesh off their bones (which had spread faster than the pundits' ability to hypothesize explanations for it: a new strain of bird flu had given way to a bioweapon; some kind of mutated smallpox; which was more plausible, given its unbelievable virulence; but if so, whoever had released it had miscalculated, because it had taken the planet in its grip in all of three days — terrorism had been supplemented by other, more fanciful explanations: rampant nanotech, set free during the mishap at that plant

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in Albany the week before; an alien virus, imported by one of the meteors that had streaked across the sky a few nights ago; and, of course, the Wrath of God, and never mind that global events bore little to no resemblance to what was described in the *Book of Revelation*: the preachers who insisted on this answer had been so practiced at adapting Biblical texts to their own ends it was no surprise they should be able to do the same in this case) (and what about those other pictures she and Glenn had seen, almost lost in the rush of things falling apart? That couldn't have been the shadow of something walking falling across that building in Chicago, could it? The thought was absurd: it would have had to be impossibly tall — but what had collided with Air Force One? Those hadn't been wings, had they? Equally ridiculous: you couldn't have a bird that size) — she gazed out the window and saw movement, a car speeding up the road — for a second, she was sure it was her parents, back from their trip at last, then she realized it wasn't their Subaru but a smaller car, a white Geo Metro, Wayne's car, which none of them ever stopped teasing him about, its engine straining as it raced along, and as she watched it, she was aware of something hovering over her, some badness preparing to fall on her and take her into its jagged gullet, and there was the opportunity for her to think, *Stay away, keep driving*, before, tires screaming, Wayne turned the car into her driveway, fishtailing half-onto the lawn, spraying chunks of dirt and grass — leaving the car running, he fell out of it and sprinted to the front door, hammering on it with both hands, shouting her name from a throat already worn hoarse — she remained where she was, hoping Wayne would race back to his undersized car and take away whatever catastrophe attended him, until she heard Glenn's slurred insistence that he was coming, for Christ's sake, keep your shirt on, so she crossed to the door, which Wayne had not stopped pounding on, fully intending to tell him to leave, whatever it was, it wasn't their problem (amazing to think that she could so completely turn her back on Wayne, whom she'd described as her best guy friend; after Glenn, of course; for years), but the instant she turned the lock, the door leapt open and Wayne was inside the house, shouting that she had to leave, now, there was no time — Jackie registered his smell, first, a heavy blend of copper and alkali: blood and fear, she realized as she took in his clothes, plastered and clotted with blood and other things (was that a piece of bone? That pink clump —) — this was already bad, and

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finally his words resolved themselves into sense and she placed her hand on his arm, wincing at the blood still fresh to the touch (what had happened to him?), telling him to relax, calm down, it was all right; but none of her reassurances reached him, he kept insisting they had to go and grabbed her by the arm, which was when Glenn found the top of the stairs and who knew what he saw? The guy he'd never stopped worrying about, the source of his anxieties about their relationship, come to carry Jackie away at last — she should have anticipated what came next, but despite his macho posturing, Glenn always had seemed to her fundamentally gentle, peaceful; still, there was nothing like a quart of gin-and-tonic to put you in touch with your inner linebacker, which he proved by barreling across the room, catching Wayne around the middle, and slamming him into the wall with sufficient force to drop them both to the floor — Wayne kept hold of Jackie as long as he could, tumbling her backwards onto the couch — now Glenn was covered in gore, too, and raising his fist to pummel Wayne, who managed to wedge a leg between the two of them and kick Glenn off him, almost to the top of the stairs — Jackie, her hands pressed over her stomach, was shouting for the two of them to stop it, this was ridiculous, but Wayne hadn't liked Glenn any more than Glenn had him; jealous, she knew, although she'd done her best to ignore the reasons fueling that jealousy — the two of them rushed together and went down in a tangle of arms and legs, grunting and cursing each other, and Jackie thought, *Great: watch Mom and Dad come home, now* — then the picture window exploded inwards and a massive, snarling shape was standing in the living room, shaking glass off itself the way a dog might shake off water — she screamed, feet kicking her away from it, right up onto the couch — there was an instant for her to register the sheer size of the thing, its bulk: it had to stand four feet at the shoulder, with a hump that arched its back another foot over that, its head big as a Thanksgiving turkey, its feet the size of diner plates; and to think simultaneously, *What's a hyena doing in upstate New York*? and, *This is no hyena* — before it pounced on Glenn, who had paused, arm upraised, when the window blew in — the thing caught his extended arm in its blunt jaws and tore it off at the shoulder: the crack and snap of bone and rip of sinew combining with the jet of blood and the scream from Glenn's throat and the growl from the thing's, a bass roar with the shriek of a violin on top of it — the thing held Glenn's arm

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dangling from its mouth like a puppy with a chew toy, then tossed the arm to one side with a flick of its head and lunged at him, while Wayne scrambled out of the way, his face blank with terror, and Jackie joined her scream to Glenn's as the thing bulled him back against the wall and seized his head between its teeth, his voice climbing registers she wouldn't have thought possible, surely his vocal cords would have to give out — she didn't know how much more she could bear — the thing brought its jaws together; there was a pop and crunch like an egg surrendering to the pressure of a hand; and Glenn's scream stopped; although Jackie's continued, pouring out her horror at what she was watching at the top of her lungs — even when Wayne found his feet, stumbled across the living room to her, right past where the thing was busy feeding, almost slipped on a large piece of glass, took her hand, and started pulling her to the front door, which was still open, only to stop as a new sound flooded the air, a high-pitched cacophony like an orchestra out of tune, and dark shapes (who knew how many? twenty? thirty? more?) galloped up the road, almost to the end of her driveway — Wayne's hand trembled in hers as if he were being electrocuted; later, she would understand that his mind had been on the point of breaking, some fundamental motor about to snap its belt and seize up — she was taking in breath for another scream, because it was hard to take in enough air for a long scream when you were six and a half months pregnant (courtesy of a bottle of Jack Daniels and the love of her life, who had just ended his life at the teeth of, of —), when Wayne's hand stilled; she glanced at his face, and what she saw reflected there, a change from vacant-eyed terror to something else, stopped her voice — "Come on," he said, pulling her away from the front door, across the living room (the thing growling and snapping at them, and, *Oh My God Glenn)*, into the kitchen and the cellar door, down the stairs and across the cellar to the oil tank, with a stop at her father's workbench to grab a rag and the box of long wooden matches Dad had had on his workbench for as long as she could remember — overhead, the floor thumped and creaked, more of the things springing into the house — Wayne consulted the gauge on top of the oil tank, and began unscrewing it — the gauge turned once, twice, then stuck — he ran back to the workbench for a wrench while above, the things whined and growled, their claws skittering on the hardwood floor — *Glenn*, she thought, *They're fighting over him, over what's left of him*

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— Wayne had the gauge off; a thick, petroleum odor filled her nostrils; and was dipping the rag into the tank, first one half, then the other — he left the rag hanging out of the tank and slid open the box of matches — "Go to the outside doors and open them," he said, selecting three matches, "but not all the way, just enough to scope out the situation in the backyard;" she did as he instructed, unlatching and shouldering up the metal doors that led out of the cellar — the arc of yard she could see was green and tranquil — "Good," Wayne said, "when I say, 'Now,' throw open the doors and run for your neighbors' house, the yellow one," and before she could ask him how he expected someone six and a half months pregnant to do anything that might remotely resemble running, he was scraping the first match along the side of the box — it popped into flame, and without pause he touched it to the end of the rag — a tongue of fire licked the rag, and she was ten feet across the yard before Wayne shouted, "Now!" behind her, her belly and breasts swinging heavily, painfully; her legs protesting, threatening to cramp, already; her lungs burning; not looking back, because she didn't want to see the thing that killed her; she just prayed it would do so quickly; and Wayne was beside her, slowing his frantic pace to match hers, and they were at the edge of the yard when the oil tank blew, gutting the house in a ywllow-orange BOOM that sent wood and glass spinning across the yard and triggered the gas tank beneath the window and, from the sound of it, Wayne's car — she could feel the heat from where she was, see the carcasses of she couldn't tell how many of the things sprawled around the house's wreckage — "Glenn," she said, but Wayne was urging her on —] —

— once, she woke, saw Wayne sitting at the fire, and went back to sleep —

— and more dreams — [— they were inside the walk-in urgent-care building on Route 9, which Jackie had insisted they stop at for medical supplies and because they needed to attend to the slash zig-zagging up Wayne's forearm, which she'd bound to the best of her ability but was worried was becoming septic: the skin around the black scab was yellow going to green, and the wound gave off a sweet smell that made her want to gag — at the very least, she wanted to locate a blister-pack of Zithromax for him; at most, if she could locate proper tools, debride it (the advantage of having [had] a nurse mother who was a frustrated doctor)

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— Wayne protested that he was fine, but went ahead of her through the building, a gun held in either hand, arms outstretched — Jackie had not yet decided she should be carrying a firearm, too, so she held the oversized flashlight they'd taken from her neighbors' house like a club; there was sufficient light in the corridors for her not to waste the batteries: although the fluorescent lights overhead were dark, the ceiling opened into skylights at regular intervals, which leaked in enough of the gray, rainy day outside to permit her and Wayne their search — she wasn't sure what, if anything, they would encounter in the urgent care's dim interior — she was reasonably certain they had gained sufficient ground on what she had started referring to as the Pack (following Wayne's lead; the name no doubt a comic book reference she wasn't plugged into) for them not to have to worry about coming face-to-snout with one of its snarling constituents — one or more of the strange purple flowers seemed more likely: almost all the cars they'd seen on their trek up Route 9 had been full of the plants; although that was the only place they'd seen them: the various stores they'd entered for food, clothing, and assorted other supplies had been empty (she'd thought she had caught movement from the corners of her eyes, but when she'd looked, there had been nothing — most likely, her nerves tricking her) — despite which, Wayne refused to abandon caution, leaping through every open door with both guns pointed ahead, then sweeping them to either side as he glanced around the room, before calling, "Clear," to Jackie, who found his performance amusing in a way she knew she shouldn't have; caution was warranted, and Wayne had proven his ability a number of times, from turning her house into a bomb, which had reduced the Pack's ranks by at minimum a half, maybe sixty percent, to the previous day, when he'd lured one of the Pack's outriders into the walk-in freezer at a McDonald's and trapped it there — it was just, there was an element of the performative to Wayne's actions, as if he were seeing himself doing whatever he was doing in the panels of a comic, illustrated by one of his favorite artists — the last week and a half's events had damaged Wayne in ways you didn't need a degree in Psych to notice (although you would need a post-doc to plumb their depths) — she might be overreacting to the changes he'd displayed in his behavior: a ruthless, fiendishly inventive violence directed principally at their pursuers; or she might be misreading his response to the extremity of the past eleven days,

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but she was uncomfortably certain Wayne had developed a split in his personality, possibly a rough reorganization of his psyche that allowed him access to areas of his self previously road-blocked by norms of upbringing, society, and religion, possibly an entirely separate identity — it was as if he were living out one of the scenarios he'd read about for years, which might be the reason for her impression that, unimaginable psychic trauma and continuing horror and anxiety aside, on some level, Wayne was enjoying this, the world reshuffled into an arrangement he could deal with more competently and confidently than his previous existence of minimum-wage labor and career stagnation, each day's priorities food, sleep, and movement — in the second exam room they entered, they found a locked cabinet that Wayne broke open; it was stacked with blister packs and bottles of antibiotics and other medications, which Jackie swept into the plastic shopping bag she'd taken from the Stop-N-Shop in great handfuls — in the third room, they found a steel box like an oversized pencil case that was full of scalpels, probes, and tweezers, as well as a dozen bottles of saline and an assortment of gauze bandages and rolls of surgical tape — "Jackpot," she said, (which had been her [dead] father's nickname for her until she'd turned twelve and refused to answer to it, anymore; wiping her eyes, she choked down nostalgia) — she positioned Wayne with his arm on the edge of the room's sink, for the blood, and had him hold the flashlight with his free hand — he wasn't happy about having to put down the guns, but in the absence of any better source of light (there was no skylight in this room) there was no other option; he settled for balancing the pistols on the opposite side of the sink and instructing her to duck if anything came through the door, which she assured him would not be a problem — she rinsed the scab on his arm with saline, to moisten and loosen it, and went to work with the scalpel and probe, flaking away the crusted blood, easing the scalpel under more stubborn patches and levering them off, Wayne gasping as they tore away; once the wound was exposed, she used half a bottle of saline to irrigate it, washing out assorted pieces of debris in the process, and had Wayne bring the flashlight in close, so that she could study the cut, testing it as gently as she could with the probe, which made the light quiver; abandoning the probe for a pair of needling tweezers she used to pop a pocket of pus and lift a piece of something out of it (which she thought was a fragment of one of the Pack's

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teeth, and which she would have loved the chance to examine in greater detail, but which she didn't mention to Wayne, since he'd only remind her that she was a Biology student, not a world-renowned scientist who might be able to learn something helpful from the sample), after which she rinsed the pus out, surveyed the arm one more time, was satisfied, squeezed a heavy stream of antibiotic cream over the wound, and began bandaging it — Jackie had done her best not to look at Wayne's face as she was working, not wanting her focus to be compromised by the pain she knew she'd find twisting its features, but with his arm cleaned and tended to the best of her ability, not to mention enough drugs to knock out any lingering infection, she relaxed and glanced at him, smiling — to leap back with a shriek at what she saw: Wayne's face gone from the mouth up, shrouded in heavy oily blackness, as if someone had dumped a can of black paint over his head; except that, instead of running down his skin, this was staying in place — Jackie backpedaled out of the room, into the hall, colliding with one of the walls, Wayne following, saying, "What? What is it?" pointing the flashlight at her, then up and down the hall, then back to her, the glare dazzling, reducing him to a silhouette; despite which, she could see something behind and above him, a cloud of blackness, billowing out like a cape or a pair of wings — she held one hand over her stomach, the other over her eyes as Wayne finally lowered the flashlight beam to the ground, still asking what it was, what was wrong, and when she risked a look at his face, it was clear of whatever she'd witnessed (if it had been there to begin with), nor was there anything behind him — she dropped her hands, waving his continuing questions away with, "Sorry — I just freaked out," a response she knew didn't satisfy him but that he was willing to let stand in the interest of maintaining their lead on the Pack — so far as she could tell, he didn't suspect she'd seen what she had — whatever it was —].

In the early morning —

— three-thirty —

— Wayne woke her for the second watch —

— which Jackie spent sitting close to the fire, died to a heap of embers, wrapped in her sleeping bag, because the night had turned colder than she'd expected, colder than any recently (forecast of an early winter?), the rifle whose name she had meant to ask Wayne, to satisfy her curiosity, on

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the ground beside her; although every fifteen minutes or so she'd pick it up and sweep the end of the Bridge with the telescopic sight, Wayne's rope trap jumping into focus, but all she saw were the couple of cars beyond the trap on the Bridge, whose lights continued their climb up and down the spectrum, blue to red to blue again — she checked Wayne, too: asleep, so far as she could tell, in his sleeping bag — her dreaming still clinging to her, Jackie found herself, not for the first time, trying to imagine what had happened to him, speculating on the tectonic shifts in his psychic geography — he had refused to narrate what had taken place before he fled to her house, whose blood and gore had been spattered over him, but she knew that his mother stayed at home; and chances were good that his father and younger sister would have been there with her; since he wouldn't answer her questions about any of them, it seemed likely that they were dead, that the Pack had burst in on Wayne and his family and torn them to pieces in front of him — which begged the question, *How had he escaped*? (not to mention, *Where had the Pack come from in the first place*?) — she suspected the answer was some variety of chance, dumb luck: maybe the Pack had come in through the back of Wayne's house, allowing him to run out the front door; maybe he'd fallen down the basement stairs and been able to sneak out the garage; it was possible his father or mother had created a diversion, sacrificed themselves to allow him to reach his car — that kind of trauma, combined with another close brush with the Pack in the form of the one that had killed Glenn, must have inaugurated some compensatory process, jury-rigged the freshly fractured fragments of his mind into an arrangement that would let him survive; and yes, she was aware that she was describing the ur-plot of any number of super heroes' origins, the grievous psychic wound that gives rise to the costumed alter ego, both answer to and continuing symptom of the trauma, but perhaps Wayne had reached for that template to keep what was left of his consciousness from flying off in all directions — how she wished she'd taken that class in Abnormal Psych this past semester, instead of putting it off for a future that hadn't come; although, would anything she would have covered in an undergraduate class have equipped her for this? and, more to the point, what was she looking for? To understand Wayne, or to try to cure him, which would consist of what, exactly? Returning him to the calm, talkative guy she'd known half a

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million years ago? — Could she afford that? Would that Wayne be able to help keep her and her baby safe the way this Wayne (whom she thought of sometimes as Batman and sometimes as the Shadow; although she mentioned neither name to him), who apparently remembered every trick and trap he'd read in *Soldier of Fortune* and the *Getting Even* books, had proven he could? — the question was rhetorical; though how much safer was she with someone whose personality continued to drift in darker directions (or whose secondary personality seemed to be subsuming his first)? Someone who; what was the right word? Possessed? Was possessed by?; whatever the oily shadow that had masked his face, stretched behind him like a cloak, was, because however much she'd done her best to convince herself that she'd undergone some variety of hallucination, she knew that wasn't the case: she had seen what she'd seen, which she thought might have been drawn out from wherever it hid by his pain, by the stress of having to hold the flashlight on the wound Jackie had reopened and picked through — in the two and a half weeks since, she'd kept on the lookout for it, but the closest she'd come to seeing it again had been last week, when she'd awakened from yet another dream of Glenn's dying scream to see Wayne leaning against the wall opposite her, an enormous shadow sprawling behind him — she'd sat up, heart jolting, only to discover it was a trick of the light (she thought) — so far, Wayne hadn't shown the slightest sign that he knew that she knew; although, how could she be sure? and she wondered if he were even aware of the darkness shadowing him — it was funny: you would have thought that here, now, in the country of fundamental things, she would have been able to turn to Wayne and ask him what was going on, and he would be able to answer her as directly, but no, she couldn't risk alienating him, making him feel she'd discovered a secret he wished to keep concealed, because what would she do if he abandoned her? — it was like when she'd learned definitely that she was pregnant, a pale blue plus confirming what her stomach had been telling her for weeks: you would have expected the gravity of the situation to have compelled her and Glenn, her and her parents, to talk about what mattered, but the opposite had been the case: Glenn hadn't been able to bring himself to say anything, as if he were afraid that putting words to their situation would be an irretrievable admission on his part, and so had retreated behind vague assurances and

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trying to have sex even more, since there was no point in worrying about protection now, which she had gone along with, even if they were in his car in the parking lot of the community college, because at least it was contact — as for her parents, they had refused to follow their initial expressions of dismay and (reluctant) support with anything — ironically, it had been Glenn's father, who had gone up one side of them and down the other, leaving the two of them in tears before ordering them the hell out of his house, and who had called at least once a week demanding to know what was going on, who seemed, in retrospect, the most honest of them all, the best able to express his feelings — no, the pressure of events didn't make conversation any easier; if anything, it made significant communication almost exponentially more impossible — all Jackie could say with any surety was that Wayne's shadow was connected to everything else, to the plague(s), the purple flowers, the Pack (which, to answer that other begged question, she had no explanation for: what they were, let alone where they'd come from; how they'd arrived in upstate New York pretty much overnight — in too many ways to count, they didn't make sense; she had watched enough specials on *Nature* and *Nova* to know that predators this size and activity would require an enormous amount of food, which, as far as she could tell, was not available: she and Wayne had encountered only a handful of bodies in their travels [everyone else, she assumed, consumed by the virus she'd seen melting people's faces on CNN, which must have continued its work right down to the bones; although that was another problem], hardly enough to sustain even the Pack's reduced numbers, and they certainly didn't appear to have much interest in vegetation; though it was possible, she supposed — nor was there much sense in them pursuing her and Wayne for as long as they had: neither of them would make much of a meal for the Pack, and surely the animals[?] should have learned to associate following them with pain and death — it was like being caught in one of those z-grade science fiction movies where spectacle and suspense trumped logic and consistency: *Last Stand Against the Pack* or somesuch), all of them pieces to a jigsaw they'd lost the box to — during the second to last day of the week of rain, when the sky had delivered itself with such force it had been impossible to see anything out of the windows of the house they'd sought shelter in (whose driveway was occupied by a minivan filled with the largest example of the

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purple flowers they'd encountered yet), and the roof had creaked ominously with each gust of the wind, she and Wayne had diverted themselves by inventing explanations for what had befallen the world, the more fanciful, the better: God had decided that the apocalypse proposed in *Revelation* wasn't sufficiently *au courant*, and so had pillaged paperback thrillers for something with more panache; monsters had broken through from the other side of the mirror, Alice's Looking-Glass Land on acid; this world had intersected some other dimension, another Earth or even series of Earths, each of them radically different, and everything had become tangled (Wayne had coined the term "quantum rupture" for this scenario); the collective unconscious, the *Spiritus Mundi*, had burst, disgorging nightmares by the score — at one point, excited by what had felt like the resurgence of the old Wayne, the one with whom she could talk about anything, Jackie had tried to verbalize the feeling that had refused to abandon her since the catastrophes had begun: that somehow all of this was contingent, none of the changes that had contorted the world permanent, not yet — the best she could manage to explain the sensation was to compare it to the way she'd felt after her best girlfriend, Elaine Brown, had been killed by a drunk driver on her way home from her job at Dunkin Donuts the year before: for about a day after her parents had sat her down at the kitchen table to tell her, Jackie had been absolutely convinced that Elaine's death was not yet set in stone, that there was some way for her to change things, if only she could figure out what it was — she'd been in shock, yes, but it was as if that blow to her system had brought her temporarily closer to the machinery of the world, allowed her to feel the peeling away of this course of events from other possibilities — the sensation she had now was different mostly in terms of magnitude and duration: when Elaine had been killed, it had been like standing next to a small motor, a motorcycle, say, for twenty-four hours or so; this was like standing beside railroad tracks while a three-engine freight train rumbled past, night and day, for weeks — Wayne had named the feeling "quantum divergence," (an awful lot of quanta flying around that day), which sounded impressive but didn't really mean what he wanted it to — it was, Jackie said, like being able to feel the Fates changing the weave of the world — whatever name you gave her awareness, whether it was anything more than a peculiar effect of profound shock, a milder version of the

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transformations that were altering Wayne (for all she knew, it was a well-documented response to trauma), the problem with her conviction of the freight train of events rattling away from alternate scenarios was its utter uselessness: after all, what could she do about it? it wasn't as if she had the ability to reverse events, to cause the Fates to loosen what they'd woven and start again (though secretly she wondered if, somewhere, there might be a door that would open back to the world she'd known) — his attempt at naming it aside, Wayne hadn't known what to say to her sensation, and the conversation had moved on to other topics, to the baby, and how much longer till Jackie was due, and what were they going to do when she was ready to give birth? — at the time, she'd hoped they'd be able to use the facilities at Vassar Hospital, at which, at the rate they were going, she projected they'd arrive around the time the baby was about to come, and if the Pack had been defeated, killed by then, there would be no reason they couldn't set up camp in it; there was a lot to be said for staying in a hospital — but they had fled up Route 9 faster than she'd anticipated; the Pack had proven more wily and ever-more-difficult to kill, and now they would have to try one of the hospitals in Kingston (if there were any point to it; if the baby were still alive; if her body didn't go into labor before then and deliver a stillborn child) — *Enough*, she thought, one hand rubbing her stomach in broad circles, as if it were a lamp and she summoning the genie; *Be all right*, she told the baby, *be all right* — funny, how much you could want something that intimidated the hell out of you, that you hadn't wanted in the first place but had felt powerless to refuse (thank you, twelve years of Catholic school), that had wrenched the wheel from your hands and turned your life onto an unexpected, unpaved road; talk about quantum divergence — she remembered the first time she'd felt the baby move, the first time she'd been sure, a flutter that had simultaneously freaked her out and thrilled her, and which had grown into kicks and jabs and using her bladder as a personal trampoline — the emotion that had grown up in response to her pregnancy had been different than what she'd expected: there had been none of the treacly sentimentality she'd been sure would ooze through her; instead, what had sprouted in her had been more basic, primitive, even, a deep connection to the child pushing out her belly, as if she could feel the umbilicus tying them together — the emotion had been supplemented by others: anxiety, mostly, and teary pathos, and

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occasionally profound contentment, as solid and heavy as a stone — *Be all right*, she told the baby, *be all right.*

Just before dawn —

— the sky filling with light, indigo paling to dark blue, the faintest stars fading out —

— the Pack came —

— their arrival heralded by the blat of a car alarm, which, she realized, Wayne must have rigged for exactly this purpose — in an instant, she had hefted the rifle to her cheek and one of the Pack leapt into focus; she moved the gun back and forth and saw two behind that one, and one more bringing up the rear, the four of them about ten feet behind the rope barrier, making their way slowly, placing each plate-sized foot with care, stopping to sniff the road in front of them, pausing to study the Bridge's support cables — there was enough time for Jackie to verify her initial count a second, a third time, and once she was certain that the four things she saw were the Pack, that was it, there were no others padding along behind them, her heart lifted with a fierce joy and she thought, *Four, there are four of them; we can do this; Wayne was right; we can be free of them, finally* — they were in rough shape, these four; it looked as if they'd pulled themselves from the wreckage of the trap at the mall: their hides were decorated with cuts, slashes, burns; patches of hair had been torn and scraped away; flaps of skin hung down like streamers; the one she'd focused on first appeared to have something wrong with its left eye, which was crusted with dark blood, while the one bringing up the rear was trailing its left back leg behind it — that they had survived made them the fittest, yes, thank you, Mr. Darwin, but watching their cautious advance, Jackie was reminded of her grandmother's dog, a poodle that had been old when she was a child and had grown steadily more gray, more infirm, more trembling and tentative each year, and if her heart wasn't moved to pity; the last four weeks had insured the impossibility of that; the association tempered her joy — *It's time to end this*, she thought, and turned to wake Wayne, who was (of course) already up and jamming pistols into his jeans, slipping the strap of his bag-of-tricks over his head, his face still — he crouched beside her, holding a third pistol out to her: "In case one of them makes it past me," he said as she took it, checked the safety, and set it on the rock beside

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her — he reached for her backpack, dragged it around for her to lean on: "Take the one to the rear," he said, "and any others that try to escape," and before she could answer, he was running away from her, heading back along the ledge — holding the rifle aloft with her right hand, Jackie eased herself up and down, until she was lying against the backpack, then brought the rifle into position, fitting the stock against her shoulder, anchoring it against the meat to take the kick, which Wayne had assured her wasn't that bad — she looked through the sight and there were the Pack, stopped in their tracks, their hackles raised; she could hear them, a deep bass note like a viol whose strings were frayed out of true, and she curled her finger around the trigger, ready for them to panic and flee, reminding herself to squeeze, not pull, and wondering if she would be able to hit, let alone stop, any of them — Wayne was running down the road toward the Bridge, his hands empty, and when the Pack saw him, the note they were holding rose to a ragged shriek, drowning out whatever Wayne was shouting at them; taunting them, no doubt, urging them on (and a part of her wondered why that should work, why animals would respond to insult, and she wondered if they weren't animals, but wasn't sure what such a question implied, because she couldn't imagine machines being bothered by Wayne's provocations, which left what? people? which was ridiculous).

It was over quickly —

— or so Jackie would think afterwards — while everything was taking place, it seemed to occur with agonizing slowness, almost a series of tableaux that shifted with each change in the Bridge's lights:

violet, and Wayne was in mid-run, his mouth open, his hands out to either side of him, the leader of the Pack's jaws tightening into a snarl that was strangely close to a grin, the others stepping forward;

blue, and Wayne was stopped, no more than twenty feet from the rope barrier, which, seen against the Pack drawing closer to it, seemed fanciful, a child's approximation of a more substantial arrangement;

green, and the leader was crouching to jump, Wayne's hands were still empty; the rear member of the Pack had ceased moving forward and appeared to be considering retreat; Jackie had its shortened head in the crosshairs;

yellow, and the leader was in the air, Wayne's hands were full of the pistols he was pointing not at the thing hanging suspended before him, but the

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pair behind it; the rearguard had turned to bolt, jerking its head out of the target, showing Jackie its neck;

orange, and the leader had struck the web and been caught in it, the ropes sagging but holding it up; the ends of Wayne's pistols were flaring white as he emptied them into the middle two members of the Pack, which lurched forward even as he blew their heads to pieces; the remaining thing was in the process of swinging itself around to flee, exposing the back of its head to Jackie's aim and she squeezed the trigger, the rifle flashing and cracking and slamming back into her shoulder, almost tearing itself out of her hands;

red, and she was struggling the sight back to her face, trying to find the last member of the Pack before it was too far away, hoping for one more shot, maybe she could wound it, cripple it and Wayne could finish it, but she couldn't see it, it was gone, and she swept the sight back and forth and there it was, its legs splayed out, the front of its head gone, shattered, and for a moment she was so happy she wanted to shout out loud, and then she thought of Wayne and searched for him, her finger hovering over the trigger;

orange, again, and she saw that Wayne had abandoned the pistols, cast them to either side, and was walking toward the last member of the Pack, which had not succeeded in disentangling itself from Wayne's rope trap and which twisted and writhed, biting the air in its frustration; she thought, *What the hell*? and aimed for the thing's chest; but

yellow, and something was wrong, the sight was dark; she drew back from it, blinked, and looked through it, again;

green, and she saw that Wayne was wearing a cape, that he was trailed by a length of blackness that billowed behind and to either side of him, across which the green light rippled and shimmered;

blue, and Wayne was standing in front of the thing, his head covered by the same blackness, except for his mouth, which was saying something to the thing that scrambled to get at him, and Jackie should have been able to read his lips; she had always been good at that; but she couldn't believe what she was seeing;

violet, and Wayne had reached out arms coated in black, seized the last member of the Pack's jaws, and torn its head apart, the thing convulsing as blood as dark as whatever it was enshrouded Wayne geysered from its

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neck — without thinking, Jackie centered the crosshairs on Wayne's chest, on the darkness that she could swear was undulating across it, that, God help her, was twitching toward the blood misting the air, and time became a room she could walk around in, sorting out the multitude of voices screaming in her head: one of them shouting, "What the fuck!" and another, "What are you doing?" and a third, "How are you going to survive without him?" a fourth, "You owe him," and a fifth, "What *is* he?" — her finger light on the trigger; if she were going to do this, it had to be now; in another second, Wayne would notice what she was doing — then the lights went out on the Bridge, plunging her view into shadow, and the baby chose that moment to kick, hard, a blow that made her say, "Oof!" and release the trigger, and then whatever Wayne had set up on the Bridge detonated in a burst of light and sound, a brilliant white CRUMP that had her ducking behind the backpack, hands over her head, the rifle dropped, forgotten — the air around her convulsed with the force of it; the rock behind her shuddered as the surface of the Bridge fell away to the river below, support wires snapping like overtightened guitar strings, shreds of metal, shards of pavement, a steering wheel raining around her as the Bridge groaned — Jackie risked a glance and saw it sagging inwards, its back broken, the forces it had balanced unleashed upon it — the suspension cables trembled, the towers leaned toward each other and she was sure the entire structure was going to twist itself asunder — the baby kicked again, a one-two combination, and she took what shelter she could behind the backpack, while the ledge continued to vibrate and the moan of thousands of tons of metal protesting its end echoed off the hills above her, making the baby squirm, and she covered her stomach with her hands, curling around it as best she could, saying it was all right, everything was all right —

— and after, Jackie set out north —

— past another trio of cars offering their floral inhabitants the same view day in, day out — she was accompanied by Wayne, who had reappeared while the Bridge was not done complaining (though it didn't fall: its towers canted crazily; its cables were too taut at the ends and too slack in the middle; and there was no way it was passable; but it still joined one shore to the other), and who was free of his black, what would you call it? costume? — she settled

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for accompaniment, awkward but accurate — in response to her question, he answered that yes, that was the end of them, but they had better get a move on: Kingston was a long way off, and who knew what this side of the Hudson would be like? — If he knew that Jackie had held him in her sights, cradling his life as she cradled the life of the baby who hadn't stopped reminding her of its presence these last hours (which meant that [maybe] she could relax about it), or if he suspected the questions that balanced at the very limit of her tongue, threatening to burst forth with the slightest provocation, or if he guessed that she walked with one hand jammed into the sweatjacket she'd tugged on because she'd hidden the third pistol there, telling him it must have been carried off the ledge by the force of the explosion, Wayne gave no sign of it.

By nightfall, they had traveled far. ☙

—For Fiona, and with Thanks to John Joseph Adams

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Kevin Haw says that writing computer code is more lucrative, but writing speculative fiction is much more fun. His short fiction has appeared in Dragon, Black Gate, *and* Jim Baen's Universe. *He lives in Fullerton, California, with his wife, JoAnn, and he uses Java to amaze visitors to his Website,* www.theHaws.org.

Requirements for the Mythology Merit Badge

By Kevin N. Haw

1. Explain to your Merit Badge counselor what Mythology is and how it differs from folklore. Describe Participatory Mythology and why we study it. Discuss how the events of 23 September 2006 forever changed mankind's relationship with the gods and explain why no one made note of them at the time.
2. What is a god? What is a hero? What is a Hero? Why is capitalization so important to your personal safety in making these distinctions?
3. Use the Internet to research how the Pagan Awakening affected your hometown, the timeline of events, and the backgrounds of the deities that first Awoke in your region.
4. Recite the twelve labors of Hercules. Perform any two of them.
5. Do *one* of the following:
   a. Compose an ode or song describing the interactions of the first supernatural beings that Awoke and the "mundane" population. Use the safety checklist in your merit badge pamphlet to verify your grammar and delete any accidental rhymes before reading your work aloud to an audience.
   b. Describe the habits and physiology of one of the following

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creatures: Gorgon, Centaur, Dragon (Chinese or European), Harpy, Naga, Kappa, Tengu, Minotaur, Chimera, or Nemean Lion. Describe how a Hero might slay such a creature, the ecological implications of doing so, and the proper hunting permits that would be required in your town or city.

c. Plan a trip to one of the following: The Parthenon, the Great Pyramids, Mount Olympus, Valhalla, Stonehenge, Hades, or Baker, CA. Describe how you would get there (i.e. by car, airplane, Charon's boat, etc.) and where you would stay (hotel, campsite, large wooden horse, etc.).

d. Visit a temple near your home and talk with the priest or priestess about the role of their deity in the Grand Design. See if the sect has an apprenticeship program and find out what you would have to do to join the priesthood.

Warning: Do not sign any legal documents or submit to any surgical procedures without your parents' permission.

e. Name and describe the four species of fairies indigenous to North America. Use the guidelines in your merit badge pamphlet to fairy-proof your family's house or apartment. Describe what you should do if you encounter a swarm of carnivorous, "Africanized" fairies.

6. Do *two* of the following:

a. Recount the Native American legend of Coyote, the trickster god, from his role in the creation of the universe through his appointment as Federal Reserve Chairman.

b. Study the history of the Pantheon Battles and name all the deities that emerged victorious from the conflict. If one of the battle sites on the National Parks Service Safe List is near your home, visit it. Report to your counselor what offerings you gave at the memorial shrine.

c. Purchase one of the following products from your local store: Bacchus Beer™, Dr. Rodriguez's Quetzalcoatl Foot Ointment™, Banshee™ Brand earplugs, or Fresca™ soda. Read the safety instructions on the package and explain them to your counselor.

d. Recount the legend of Atlantis. Use newspaper clippings to

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explain the impact of its resurfacing on international shipping routes and Global Warming.

e. Draw your family tree at least four generations back. Explain the terms "dominant gene," "infectious DNA," and "retroactive inheritance." Explain what the Mythical Offspring Act is and how it prevented civil war. On your family tree, mark your earliest ancestor to demonstrate Mythical Properties and tell His/Her story.

7. Memorize the exact date that the Mortal Age ended in your state or province. Create a shadow box or diorama recounting those events. Animating the models through mechanical or occult means is encouraged but not required.
8. Discuss career opportunities in Mythology with your counselor. Research what schooling and/or lineage would be required for each job.
9. Take a few minutes and talk to your counselor about the role Mythology plays in your everyday activities. Discuss how your everyday life (school, sports, dating, etc) would be different if you had lived in the Mortal Age. Discuss how the world would be different if we weren't all gods.

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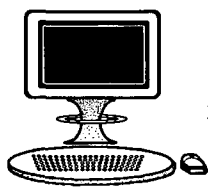

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

ONCE WERE MOVIES

ONCE WERE a director by the name of Lee Tamahori, who made a movie, a very good movie, entitled *Once Were Warriors*, a powerful character study of a deracinated Maori family in the dead-end slums of Auckland. But that was a long, long time ago, back before he moved from New Zealand to Hollywood, started hanging out at L.A. fetish clubs, and took to churning out pictures like *xXx: State of the Union*, *Die Another Day*, and *Along Came a Spider*. Now Tamahori has turned his deracinated talent to a Philip K. Dick property, *The Golden Man*, a film that has been entitled (exemplifying the fund of imagination that studios employ in such matters) *Next*. Imagine that title spoken by a harried counter clerk at Burger Death, his face covered by a film of grease that nourishes a fresh crop of acne, and you will have some idea of how the quirky Dickian notions of free will, perception, and the nature of reality have been handled in the film. But enough has been said about Hollywood's bowdlerization of Dick, the neutering of everything vital in his work in the service of creating high concept-driven action pictures; so let's skate past that topic and get right to the heart of the matter.

Whereas Dick's original story dealt with a golden-skinned mutant and a government paranoid about his pre-cog abilities, *Next* tells the story of Cris Johnson (Nicolas Cage), an almost down-and-outer who's earning a marginal living as a small-time gambler and a magician with a Vegas lounge act, assisted in these pursuits by his ability to see two minutes into his future. Into his nebbish life comes FBI Agent Callie Ferris, played by Julianne

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Moore, a fine actress who here seems to be taking on a role that Joan Allen rejected and not relishing it at all. She's desperate to have Johnson's help in tracking a gang of Eurotrash terrorists who've stolen a ten-kiloton nuke and are determined to blow up L.A., an idea I came to have a certain empathy with during the movie. Why they want to commit this atrocity is unclear, as is why Agent Ferris thinks Johnson can help (I mean, you can't do that much in the way of stopping nuclear explosions in two minutes), as is how she found out about him...as is damn near everything else in the picture. The most unclear thing is how come Johnson, who has an amazing ability to make precision judgments relating to the information he receives from his glimpses of the future (he's able to avoid bullets, for instance, by dodging at the last moment, causing them to miss by *just* this much), hasn't ripped off a casino and isn't living in a mansion in Rio. Jessica Biel is along for the ride as Liz, who teaches Native American kids on the reservation and has a heart of gold, a killer body, and a couple of Worst Actress awards. Johnson waits for her every day at a Vegas diner, mooning over a two-olive martini. He has seen her enter the diner at eight minutes past eight in a vision and believes she holds the key to his fate. With her by his side, he can see more than two minutes into the future, a whole lot more, and this allows for a plot twist so outrageously clichéd that it almost works...but nothing really works in this movie. It is essentially a ninety-minute chase scene sectioned by undigested chunks of exposition and a sliver of love scene during which Cage stares at Biel like an addled goat wearing Tom Hanks's hairdo from *The Da Vinci Code*.

The most abysmal of Cage's performances is surely *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, when he trotted out that unforgettable Italian accent; but he's on quite a roll quality-wise with his last few pictures. First there was *The Wicker Man*, a film that will go down as a classic of unintentional humor (Cage in a bear suit, Ellen Burstyn as a bee-woman, Neil LaBute's Fun-With-Misogyny directing style). And then there was the jaw-droppingly horrid *Ghost Rider*. When that icon of the sinister and the macabre, Peter Fonda, plays the Prince of Darkness.... Well, you've been given a strong hint that the movie is in trouble. Cage does an Elvis impression for half his screen time and wears a flaming skull for the other half. The

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skull is by far the better actor. While watching the movie, I fantasized about taking the audience hostage, subjecting them to a course in Godard-style guerrilla cinema, and sending the best students on a suicide mission to Studio City. *Next* falls somewhere between those two...and can't get up. It's substanceless, flat, and uninvolving, a celluloid pie smashed into the face of the audience without any whipped cream topping to make the experience semi-palatable.

The premise of *Grindhouse*, the film oddity directed by Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, is to offer the moviegoer an evening at a drive-in theater double-feature during the 1970s, complete with cheesy title cards, previews of mega-violent exploitation flicks (Cage stars as Fu Manchu in one of them), and film that's rife with glitches (scratches, scuffs, burn-throughs), projector troubles, and missing reels. It's a clever idea, classic high concept, and perhaps it will be successful at the box office and in DVD sales. Be that as it may, the filmmakers (especially Mr. Rodriguez) seem to be missing the point that the kids who went to these movies back in the day didn't actually watch them or, if they did, did so intermittently between bouts of making out, hell-raising, and six-pack consumption. But I imagine they're working from the premise that, forty years after the fact, our nation has been sufficiently stupefied so that what once was viewed as trash is now booked into mainstream theatres as a nostalgic "masterpiece" (yes, that word has been used in reference to *Grindhouse*, notably by Richard Roeper, the new Michael Medved) and fawned over by the fanboy legions.

You would think that Rodriguez was admirably suited to the project — after all, his career was founded on exploitation flicks; but his offering, *Planet Terror*, in which zombies take over a small Texas town, is a tepid version of the form. Though replete with exploding heads, zombie armies (with Bruce Willis as a zombie soldier, Lieutenant Muldoon, in command), bubbling pustules, haphazard plotting, one-legged go-go dancers, badass twin babysitters, decapitations, castrations, squibs like giant red loogeys, and so on and so forth, his movie comes off as peculiarly bloodless and unpersuasive. I had the thought that Rodriguez must never have seen an exploitation flick, but that he had read extensively on the subject and thus included one of everything on the Z-movie checklist. If there is enjoyment to be had

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from watching it, it's because you're in on the joke, but that and a few jump scares are not enough to keep the laughs going. *Planet Terror* is, I suppose, the perfect exploitation flick, allowing the audience's attention to wander throughout. If there had been a couple of cute girls in a '65 Chevy Impala with the top down parked next to me to flirt with or toss things at or otherwise hassle, that would have filled in the dead spots; but I doubt the director was going for this degree of verisimilitude and it was evident that the audience didn't receive that message, sitting primly in rows on either side of me, watching as they might an A-list film. What Rodriguez doesn't appear to get is that the exploitation genre was funded by genuine emotion (usually anger), and that what made these films work — when they did work — were the flashes of real anger that seeped through now and again. Without them, his movie comes off as a tired joke told by a comedian with bad timing.

Death Proof, Tarantino's film, gives us Kurt Russell as the charming, amiable serial killer, Stuntman Mike, whose Dodge Charger has a death-proofed driver's seat in order to allow him to survive the most extreme of crashes. Those who ride with him, of course, are not so fortunate. Russell is a seemingly effortless actor, capable of making any role sympathetic, and Tarantino has showed the wisdom here to rehabilitate Russell as a B-picture actor, allowing him to return to roots established in films like Carpenter's *The Thing*, *Escape From New York*, and—most pertinently—*Breakdown*.

The movie consists of two long dialogue sections and two action sequences. During its first half, when Russell is on-screen as a full participant, *Death Proof* is quality exploitation fodder and not surprisingly so. Except for *Jackie Brown*, one of the best love stories of the '90s, Tarantino's movies have all proudly displayed a film-geek cachet. He is the ultimate fanboy auteur and when Russell delivers lines like, "You're going to have to get scared — immediately!", we know we're in the hands of someone who understands the genre. But during the movie's last half, when Russell is reduced to a target, it bogs down in Tarantino-isms, in banal chatter laced with a heaping helping of "motherfuckas" and "Nigga, please!"s. The three women who take revenge on Russell are merely vehicles for Tarantino's indulgent dialogue style and never catch on as characters, leaving

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Stuntman Mike as the sole human being in the picture. That said, *Death Proof* is by far the superior of the two films, worthy of comparison to the original films of the genre, although not to the best of them, whereas *Planet Terror* is just another ingloriously rotten movie.

If you're up for three hours plus of wink, wink, nudge, nudge, then this may be for you. One imagines Tarantino and Rodriguez chortling in a high school corridor, congratulating themselves on their cleverness after having dropped cherry bombs down the toilets in the girl's bathroom. To most of us, it's not that funny. Still, in an era of crappy films, I suppose an homage to crap was inevitable.

In the interests of recommending at least one decent genre movie per column, I'd like to mention *Hate 2 0*, a horror/thriller filmed in English by Italian director Alex Infascelli, now available on Region 0, PAL DVD. Superbly photographed by cinematographer Arnaldo Catinari, the movie combines the claustrophobic tension of Neil Marshall's *The Descent* and the latent eroticism of Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, telling the story of a group of young women who have marooned themselves on a desert island with minimal resources for the purpose of going on a water diet. No one will pick them up for a week. Something else is occupying the island. Bad things ensue...albeit stylishly.

Of special note, though I'm not sure what genre it falls into, Alejandro Jodorowsky's ultimate cult movie, *El Topo*, finally makes its way to DVD. Part Spaghetti Western, part LOTR-type quest, part ultraviolent exploitation flick, sporting influences as wildly variant as Luis Buñuel, Russ Meyer, and Antonin Artaud, this is the film that started the midnight movies, playing for months at late shows in Greenwich Village during the '60s to perplexed yet appreciative audiences. In what is ostensibly a western, the film's hero, also named El Topo, is a gunslinger and a seeker after enlightenment who crosses the Wild West to duel the Four Masters, black magicians of an Aleister Crowley-ish bent. He fends off whip-cracking lesbians, the advances of a beautiful woman, and Russian Roulette-playing priests; and winds up as a Holy Fool who saves what appears to be the cast of *Freaks* from their mountain prison. Filled with incomprehensible imagery, some of it gorgeous, some grotesque, some depraved, *El Topo* is altogether a mess, but a glorious, unforgettable mess.

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Robert Reed's knack for extrapolating the social implications of new science is once again on display in this new story, a smart look at what the future might hold If This Goes On....

If We Can Save Just One Child...

By Robert Reed

SCHOOLYARD

ONE MAN LOOKED OUT OF place. Twenty years on the job and a software package from one of the new security companies told the Physicality Facilitator to ignore everyone else on the schoolyard and focus his full attention on the fellow who was sitting apart from the other adults. The suspicious man was middle-aged, dressed in slacks and a sweat-dampened dress shirt. He had his rump perched on a concrete retaining wall, his face betraying a less-than-comfortable expression. Following standard protocols, the PF took photographs from several angles before asking the software for final interpretations. Moments later, the PF found himself with a thorough analysis of the man's posture and face, six stars on the seven-point scale lighting up.

Three weeks later, that popular and wildly profitable software would receive what was dubbed an upgrade. But in reality, the product was so flawed that its owners would have to obliterate half of their previous

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work, replacing a stew of cranky algorithms and flawed databases with tools that were still inadequate, but measurably better than the awful predecessor.

"Hello, sir," the PF began with a loud, overly friendly voice. "And how are you today?"

The man on the wall looked up, mildly surprised.

The PF introduced himself without extending his hand. Then with a smile worthy of a yearbook photograph, he asked, "Do I know you, sir?"

"I don't know what you know," the stranger replied. "Or what you don't know, for that matter."

The response was unexpected, and a blatant challenge. The PF stiffened his smile. "If I might ask, sir. Are you here to pick up a student?"

"Yes."

"Which child?"

The yard was littered with waiting parents and nannies, day care services and several older siblings. But the instructor knew most of those faces, or at least he could see nothing alarming in the other people's body language. Sitting alone was a problem. Not conversing with the other parents was a signal. Not that anything would come of this, the PF reasoned...but still, in these grim times, someone in his position had to ask all the right questions.

The stranger glanced at the old brick schoolhouse. With a tight, quiet voice, he reported, "I'm waiting for my son."

"I need a name, sir. Please."

"Olsen. Pepper Olsen."

The PF fed the name into his reader. Then with an exceptionally serious tone, he warned, "We don't have any children named Olson."

"Try an 'e' and a 'n,'" the man muttered.

This time the PF was rewarded with the image of a smiling first-grader and links to a pleasant-faced woman who looked somewhat familiar. "Does his mother normally pick him up?"

"My wife does. Yes."

"And she's not here today?"

The man — Mr. Olsen, presumably — gave the world a mocking glance. With his gaze fixed on his accuser, he said, "No. She's stuck at home."

"I see."

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"I don't usually pick up. But my wife, Pepper's mother, is sick today. And for some reason, she doesn't think people would appreciate seeing a woman barf on the playground."

"Sir," said the PF in a slow, injured tone. "I have to ask these questions. This is what I do. What every teacher does."

"Fine."

"Can you tell me, sir? Why isn't your image in our files?"

"Because I haven't found time to come in and prove my identity and get my official picture taken." Then with a loud, exasperated voice, he added, "The school year's what? Two weeks old?"

Other parents heard him, or at least they noticed his smoldering tone. The nearest people stopped trading gossip, turning to watch the familiar instructor and a gentleman nobody recognized.

"We need your face on file, sir."

The man sitting on the wall pulled his arms around his belly. Softly, but firmly, he warned, "I'm not feeling that great myself."

"That's too bad," the PF volunteered.

That particular security software had several major flaws, one of which was confusing physical distress for criminal intent.

The PF spent several moments examining the student's full file. Pepper and his family had moved into the district during the summer. As it happened, there was a father on the very short list of people permitted to pick him up after school. "What's your name, sir?"

"Gary Olsen," the man replied instantly, probably anticipating the question.

But that proved little, since the father's name was a matter of public record. "Now please describe your boy to me."

"He's six-foot-nine. And blue. And when's he's pissed off, he starts spitting plutonium."

That didn't help at all. The PF said as much with his silence.

"Okay, let me try again." The man gave a detailed description of his son. And then on his own, he asked, "Do you know what Pepper's wearing today?"

"No, sir. I don't."

"Well I don't know either. I left for work before the kid crawled out of bed."

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The PF was struggling with his own calculations. Did he press this business any further, and if so, using which officious route? Seven years ago, on one of the best days of his life, he happened to notice a young man lurking at the edge of this very same schoolyard. A routine call to the police proved his intuitions valid: The lurker was a registered sex offender, and by walking beside the soccer field, he had broken the terms of his probation.

But that was ages ago. These days, simple sex offenders were the least of his problems.

If you were a child, these were desperately dangerous times.

The stranger — Gary Olsen — eased himself off the wall and took a careful breath. "How much time before the dismissal bell?"

"Two, maybe three minutes."

"Listen. I know you're trying to do your job. But you need to realize that I'm working hard not to crap my pants here. I don't know why you think I'm worth the attention, but if it's important to you, haul me to the office. Now. Lock me in the bathroom, and then you can run to room 113 and find Pepper and bring him back. Then with the principal's help and a couple calls to your district office, maybe we can get our mess taken care of. Does that sound like a plan to you?"

The PF didn't consider himself as having a temper. And that's why his present anger bothered him so much. This Olsen fellow almost certainly had reasons for being here. But the PF had never seen six stars out of seven from the personality assessment equipment, and he had to wonder if there were a second, secret agenda at play. Not that he could prove it, of course. But justice required that something was accomplished, and twenty years of teaching gym class had taught him a few useful tricks. That's why he smiled — a forced and oversized but exceptionally sneaky smile. "I'm sorry, Mr. Olsen. Have a nice evening with your son. And please, wish your wife a speedy recovery."

The sick man bent forward, green in the face now.

Then the bell sounded, and moments later, a young boy matching the picture in the database sprinted outside with the rest of the first-graders. By then his father was standing alone in the open, right next to the bright white lines that marked the kickball area. "Dad? What's up? Where's Mom?"

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The PF couldn't hear the man's response, but he felt the heat when a last long glance was thrown his way.

Mr. Olsen wasn't any threat.

More than likely.

But because it was his job, the PF filled out the standard form used to report suspicious occurrences, and he sent his work to a national clearinghouse where the paranoia of a world was gathered together — twenty thousand forms on the average school day, each one searched for patterns, tendencies, and the scent of even one worthwhile clue.

The Pool

"Did you see what they found?"

"Found?"

"In Thailand. You hear the big news?"

Two mothers were visiting the water park, sharing the shade of a single enormous umbrella. It was a Saturday in June; schools had just let out for summer. The women were acquaintances whose paths occasionally crossed at the grocery and church. One was large and loud, the other as small as some children and naturally quiet. But they shared all the topical fears of their day. News from Thailand? That could only mean one thing!

"Did they find children?" asked the little woman.

"Eight of them," her companion said with disgust.

"No, I hadn't heard — "

"Still babies," the big woman added. "Caucasian. In some sort of jungle compound, from what I saw on the Web."

"Whose children are they?"

"A couple keepers have been arrested."

"No," the little woman explained. "I mean, where did they come from? Does anyone know?"

"Nobody's admitting anything. Not publicly, at least." Pausing for a moment, the big woman scanned the crowd until she found her daughter — a substantial girl in her own right. "They've already done the usual tests. Put the kids' DNA on the Websites. But how many people know their own genetics?"

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"I do. I had my DNA mapped "

The confession took a moment to be noticed. "Yours, or your kids'?"

"All of us have," the little woman admitted.

Her companion found that intensely amusing. But she managed not to laugh, throwing a joke at herself instead. "Nobody wants my chromosomes. Good God, I can barely get my husband interested in this cranky old body."

But the small woman had always been pretty and quite sensitive about her looks. "This is a real fear of mine," she offered.

"It shouldn't be."

"Ever since that time in Russia...."

What an awful business that had been! Two years ago, a routine drug arrest in Moscow led to a warehouse where thirty blond toddlers were living in pens. Or chicken coops. Or in some stories, prison cells. The girls were two and three years old, and each one had the same beautiful face. Subsequent tests determined that they were genetically identical, but with the shortened telomeres and the occasional mutation common among cheaply rendered clones.

The subsequent investigation proved that the poor toddlers were being groomed for sale to highly motivated customers.

That's when the nightmare began.

"I know it's not likely," said the little woman. "The odds of that happening to my family...or to me...."

"Very, very unlikely," the big woman promised. "Besides, gene thieves aren't sophisticated. If they want to make a profit, they need young DNA. But inside you and me is nothing but muddy old genetics, and our telomeres are already gotten too short." She threw out a big laugh, adding, "It's sad to hear, but they'd throw our junky old cells out with the trash."

"Unless somebody made a mistake," the pretty woman argued, her voice soft and sorry. "If they aren't sophisticated, like you said, then they could easily clone the wrong skin cells."

"Sure, that's possible. I guess."

"I believe in taking precautions." She tried deflecting her acidic fears with her own laugh. A tight, unconvincing laugh, as it happened. "I mean, what if those babies in Thailand turned out to be me?"

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"What would you do about it?"

"I'm not sure." She shrugged. "If I had legal rights and they would let me...I guess I'd try to help the poor girls somehow."

"With money? Or would they come live with you?

"I really don't know," she admitted. "I'd have to pray about it. Of course. And then I'd do whatever's right."

"Who wouldn't want to do what's right?" asked the big woman.

Yet the world was full of evil people. After a few moments of dark reflection, her friend begged, "Can we please change the subject?"

"Thank goodness, yes."

Two hours later, the fearful woman was sitting alone, napping until the umbrella's shade pulled away from her tiny, lovely face. When she woke, she noticed two police officers talking to a young boy. With pride, the boy was showing off a fresh scrape on his leg, and then with a matter-of-fact gesture, he pointed the officers toward the smallest slide.

The woman instantly shouted for her two children.

Her oldest was a girl at least as pretty as her mother. She looked a little worried, but impressed. "It's inside the tube," she reported. "Down at the bottom of the slide."

"What is?"

"The thing."

"What thing?" the woman asked.

"It's sandpaper, I guess. Stuck there with glue."

She began to tremble.

"Some kid did it," the daughter offered. "Wanted to be an idiot, I guess."

"Where's your brother?"

"How would I know?"

"Did you get scraped?"

"No, Mom." Then after a watchful pause, the girl asked, "What is the matter with you?"

"Find your brother, meet me at the gate. Right away."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

Lifeguards had turned off the slide's water, and the more athletic officer did her best to climb down to the abrasive pad. But she didn't

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remove the object. Instead she climbed back out and called for a biohazard team. And then the public address system screamed to life, offering a few apologies and then a warning that for the next little while, no one would leave the grounds.

A blond boy and a brown-haired man were standing nearby. "Did you see it, Dad?" asked the boy.

"Nope."

"You didn't get cut?"

His father looked himself over. "Guess not."

"But you went down that slide."

"I don't remember. Did I?"

"You did. I saw you."

His father didn't speak.

"Just before the kid got scraped."

"Pepper," said the man quietly, but with feeling. "This is nothing, believe me. Some kid's dumb-ass prank, and it doesn't mean anything."

"But, Dad — "

"Son," said the man. "Shut it."

The boy nodded, quietly accepting that nugget of parental logic.

That's when the man glanced over his shoulder, staring for a moment at the prettiest face in the crowd.

When he looked away again, the woman sobbed. She dropped into the nearest folding chair, feeling a great weight bearing down on her racing heart.

The Fair

"I promise. This is going to be a waste of time."

Silence.

"I don't even know why I'm here. And I'll be damned if I see why you got pulled in on this."

"My son — "

"Pepper, is it?"

"Where's my boy?"

"His mom's sitting with him now. I can let you see him, maybe in a few minutes. Just as soon as we get our business done."

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The subject didn't ask, "What business?" Nor did he offer any of the other obvious, urgent questions.

Interesting.

"My name's Steve," said the investigator. He gave the files another cursory glance. "And you're Gary?"

"Yes."

"Your wife's name — "

"She's my ex-wife," the subject said, with feeling.

"Sorry to hear that."

Silence.

"So you came to see the State Fair, Gary? You and your son did?"

"Yes."

"How is it?"

"Excuse me?"

"I haven't come here in years. Is it any good?"

"Bad food. Dangerous rides." The subject managed a smile. "Yeah, it's pretty much like always."

"How old's the boy?"

"Thirteen."

"And you?"

There was a pause. Then with a loss of patience, the subject said, "You know how old I am. You've got my files in front of you."

"Fifty-five."

A pause. "So what do they say?"

The investigator lifted his gaze. "What does who say?"

"My files."

"This and that. Not much, from what I can tell."

Silence.

"Know why you were picked up, Gary?"

"I can guess." The subject had a tight, smart face, and he was definitely restraining his emotions. "Something happened at the Fair tonight. Didn't it?"

"We're still trying to decide that."

"But you, or somebody else, felt an obligation to round up every person of interest. Is that right?"

"You know how it goes." The investigator shrugged and managed a

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put-upon expression. "We look at the databases, and the AI hunts for tendencies, and of course there's about a thousand cameras scattered around the Fair grounds — "

"Was I someplace I shouldn't have been?"

"Damned if I know. I'm not even sure why you got swept up in this nonsense."

The subject shifted in his chair, volunteering nothing.

"I see two past incident reports," the investigator mentioned. "At your son's school, and less than a year later — "

"Does that matter?"

"Incident reports? They can matter, yes."

"No. You said, 'Less than a year later.' As if that's an important detail."

"Oh, that's, no, not at all." The investigator was honest, admitting, "It's just that two incident reports are more likely to trigger an AI's attention. About five times more likely than a single hit. But of course, other factors come into play here."

"Like what?"

"During the second incident...."

"With the crazy woman," the subject volunteered.

"Yeah, she does come across that way. I guess. Although I think 'neurotic' is the more accurate description."

"She pointed her finger at me."

"She thought you were acting suspicious."

"Of doing what?"

"There was an abrasive pad — "

"For cleaning dishes!"

There. Real emotions started to boil. With an agreeable nod, the investigator said, "Sure, it was a nothing incident. Just some unidentified kid and his mom's scouring pad, plus some glue. The kid probably just wanted to make his world crazy for a while."

"I was not a suspect."

Gary Olsen had been a suspect, but only briefly. The investigator said, "Tsk," while staring at the subject. "Actually, I've got to tell you. It's not those two incidents that got the software's attention. It's your job."

The man flinched.

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"If I'm not mistaken, you're a trained biologist."

"I have a degree in limnology," the subject replied. "Do you know what that means?"

"Water stuff."

"Not genetics."

The investigator shook his head. "Fish don't have genes?"

The man took the Lord's name in vain.

"I know this doesn't seem quite right, Gary. But it's just the way these stupid systems work. You have two prior interviews, plus a specialty implicated in a series of horrible crimes that are occurring worldwide."

Again, the man swore.

"Hardly fair, but my hands are tied." With some subjects, he might have shown his hands. But this fellow didn't seem likely to fall for cheap theatrics. "I've got a girl from the Fair who's got a deep cut in her leg, and she's claiming that some strange man jabbed her with medical equipment."

Silence.

"You wouldn't know anything about that, Gary?"

"No."

"If we showed her your picture, and a few other photos too...just to play by the rules...do you think she'd pick your face out of the pile?"

"I have no idea what she might or might not do."

"I guess you wouldn't know, would you?"

Suspicious silence.

"Limnology, huh?"

"I quit the field years ago."

"Why? Got tired of water?"

"No," he said in a smoldering tone. "I didn't make tenure at the university and decided to change careers."

"Probably smart."

The subject paused before saying, "It's all in those files. I'm sure. Today I sell real estate."

"Hey, so does my sister-in-law," the investigator offered. "Tough business these days. She says we're in a big down cycle."

The subject sighed. Then he looked at the floor, a contemplative

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mood ending when he asked, "How many cases of bootleg cloning are there? In the average year, worldwide?"

"I'm really not sure, Gary."

"On average, three-and-a-half," the subject offered.

"Which means — ?"

"Two to five cases every year, and not even for a decade now. And the total number of Americans who have had their DNA stolen is exactly five. Five. Which puts this panic into a different light, if you actually bother to think things through."

"If I was smart, you mean?"

The subject saw his misstep, but he couldn't stop himself. "I'm not talking about you. I mean everybody. When another illegal cloning operation is discovered, it gets attention from every medium. The crime is sensational, and nobody's sure how to react, and when you see images of little kids being raised for some purpose or another that has to be immoral — "

"The sex industry is the usual client," the investigator interrupts.

"And that's a very narrow, very select market," the subject pointed out. "Some pedophiles will pay a fortune for four or six or a dozen kids with the same looks and mannerisms. Sure. That's what keeps this tiny industry alive."

"We can't say it's tiny," the investigator countered. "We don't know how big it is, since we can only count the cases we actually uncover."

"Right." The subject was red-faced, agitated to the point where he made fists in his lap. "There could be a thousand cloning farms scattered across the world — secret facilities selling tens of thousands of infants to an underground world of sick men and sick women who not only can pay the enormous costs of cloning, but then manage to keep their huge, same-faced families a secret from neighbors and friends and everyone else in their twisted lives."

The investigator remained silent, waiting for whatever came next.

"Hey, I want this business stamped out," said the subject, spit flying for his quivering mouth. "More than anybody else, I want it gone. We'd have a lot healthier world if people started to consider the genuine dangers. But as long as the public fear is stirred up by these rare incidents...these awful but very rare crimes...we're going to keep making

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ourselves crazy about things that happen a lot less often than...well, than people getting killed on faulty amusement park rides...."

"Now you're the one sounding a little crazy," the investigator mentioned.

"No, I'm just a neurotic," the subject snapped. "You blame me?"

"Hey, Gary. Play along here. I'm just doing my job."

The subject nearly said something else, but caught himself. Then another thing occurred to him. Looking hard at the investigator, he said, "You already showed her my picture. Didn't you?"

"That girl? Yeah, a colleague of mine did that chore about an hour ago."

A look of undiluted disgust came into the subject's face. "What did she tell you? Did she pick me out of the lineup?"

"Actually, she picked me." The investigator had to smile and shake his head. "No, we don't think this kid's very credible. She was doing something she shouldn't have been doing, and she got hurt, and now she's telling a dumb story. But really, you can never be sure about appearances. That's why I decided that you and I should enjoy this little chat...."

The Sandbox

When Evan was at a very delicate age, his older brother tormented him with the idea that he was a clone.

"You were born in Brazil," his brother claimed one day, pointing with authority at a random, erroneous point on a brightly colored map of the world. "You and your clone brothers...you were being raised by cannibals."

"I wasn't."

"Oh yes, you were," the eleven-year-old warned him. Then with a grim smile, he added, "Those cannibals had you living inside cat cages. You couldn't move, and they force-fed you all sorts of goodies."

Evan was a pudgy, desperately insecure child.

"Know what veal is?"

"We ate it last night. Right?"

"That was veal made from a fat calf. But you were going to be a special meal for somebody else's family."

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"I was not!"

"Sure, you were."

The boy considered his dire situation. "Then how did I get here?" he asked.

His tormentor licked his lips and giggled. "We bought you, of course. And next Christmas, we're having you instead of an old turkey."

It was the worst kind of lie, and his brother was punished severely for what he had done. But that early horror left its mark. Or perhaps something in Evan's nature assured that regardless of what happened in his childhood, he would grow up scared and unhappy. Maybe the story was a convenient excuse. Whatever the reason, twenty years later he was slender and strong, but preyed upon by doubts and black fears. Even on his best days, he suffered from the enduring conviction — indeed, the muscular hope — that the world was rich with evil.

During college, Evan gravitated toward the conservative groups still in the fight against immoral biological sciences. He marched with Christians, chanted with Muslims, and for an entire semester, he allied himself with a band of zealots who used cloning as an excuse to make pipe bombs that were detonated only in empty fields. Plainly, the cause was a mess, and its warriors were unfocused and unable to achieve even tiny victories. The old ideas about bioethics had evaporated. Virtually every type of research was allowed now. Around the globe, the elderly and sick were routinely given tissues and organs grown from stem cells that might or might not belong to them. Athletes, even weekend amateurs, routinely doped themselves with extra muscle and lung tissue. The wickedest nations, where almost anything was legal, allowed the wealthy and self-obsessed to make clones of themselves. Even one of the girls that Evan dated in college — a good little Southern Baptist from Alabama — confessed that what he loved best about her body had been cultivated in a sterile laboratory.

The only true taboo left was cloning people without their consent.

Genuine incidents remained quite rare. But Evan possessed both the focus and imagination to see patterns where others saw happenstance. To him, it was self-evident that there were wicked people and slick organizations that existed for no reason but to steal away a person's genetics. What Evan believed as a boy still held its grip on him. There had to be an

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underground market, and one or many governments were involved in the trade. Anybody with a clear gaze and the right frame of mind could see the threat, and the only way to fight the war was to remain solitary, strong and secure, waiting for the opportunity to do some genuine good.

Evan had worked out a routine that felt responsible as well as just. This led to a few uncomfortable moments. Strange men would say, "What are you looking at?" An old woman once warned him that he was making her nervous. And once, an off-duty policeman found him near a schoolyard and misunderstood Evan's pure intentions. No, he wasn't interested in little boys. He was watching for people who might want to steal a child's genetics. But there was no way to admit his true purpose. So he spun a lie about looking for a niece who was supposed to be here with his sister, and he gave them names and described them, and then asked the officer if he'd seen either one.

An incident report may or may or not have been filed.

Evan didn't bother to check.

But after that scare, he was more cautious about his work. Using hidden cameras, he photographed thousands of suspects, and with software linked to a multitude of databases, he identified hundreds of people who proved their innocence without having to say one word.

Then came a warm spring afternoon at a popular playground, and the gray-haired gentleman who was watching a special boy.

The boy was amazing, yes — wiry and strong, and in ways that Evan could only marvel at, fearless. He was perhaps ten years old, wearing a wide smart grin, and he would scramble up the side of a shelter standing in the center of an expansive sandbox. The shelter had a passing resemblance to a castle. Written signs and audio overseers warned the boy that he was using the structure improperly. But the climb was just a minor accomplishment. Once on top — three meters off the ground, nearly — the boy would assume a tucked position, the balls of his bare feet set against a horizontal pipe. Then he would lift his hands, and with a smooth, seemingly effortless motion, he would leap backward, the bare feet snapping as the legs soared above his twirling body.

Somehow, that young acrobat landed upright in the soft sand, facing the shelter, unharmed and perfectly in balance.

Several adults and half a dozen kids watched the show. One young

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woman chastised the boy for endangering others. But words couldn't stop him. Again and again, he climbed high and made the same leap, each time lifting higher and landing closer to the edge of the sandbox, the final jump putting him within arm's reach of a steel fence.

A gray-haired man happened to be sitting on a nearby bench, one arm thrown protectively over a blond boy with a passing resemblance to him.

That was his grandson, Evan learned in time.

Later that day, a pair of face-recognition packages produced the same name — Gary Olsen — and with that name came an empty criminal file. But a resourceful man has countless avenues, and through means not entirely legal, Evan recovered both a thorough biography of the fellow as well as three old incident reports — a string of telltale clues whose cumulative effect was to make him lie awake through the night, enjoying his extraordinary luck.

Saving One Child

Three careers and two failed marriages might have embittered most men. But once he reached retirement age, Gary discovered that he still had his health, and for no obvious reason at all, he acquired a late-in-life capacity for happiness. His abrasive humor was still present, but tempered with a measure of wisdom and a practiced capacity for knowing how to act in public. Maybe being a grandfather was the secret. Certainly he pulled all the pleasure he could out of that experience. And he liked to believe that he was a better father now, too. Although maybe that's because Pepper was an adult, responsible in his own right and far smarter than his father could ever pretend to be.

Of course Gary could be happy for a much less noble reason: His days weren't filled with work that he despised, and his personal peace stemmed from that.

Whatever the cause, each day was a little celebration.

Most mornings began with a walk on a bikeway that on Sunday mornings, like today, was almost empty.

Gary noticed the young man at a distance — a solitary figure that in some fashion or another looked as if he should be alone. There was a lonely quality to the silhouette and its patient, nowhere-to-be gait. At closer

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range, the man seemed a little peculiar. Why was that? Because he stared in Gary's direction but didn't quite look at him? Or was it the way he kept his shoulders hunched, hands meeting in the front pocket of a sweatshirt that looked unbearably heavy for what was proving to be a warm, sultry morning?

Gary never suspected that the man would produce a pistol.

And even when it was in plain view, held firmly in both hands, the weapon had an unreal quality. Surely, it was a toy. A prop. Somebody's misguided attempt at humor, and Gary just happened to be an accidental witness to something of no real consequence.

Then the young man said, "Mr. Gary Olsen."

And recited his address.

And then with a dry, slightly nervous voice, he said, "I know what you've done. And I know what you are."

Too late, Gary realized that at this point on the path, no homes or traveled streets were in view. And since it was Sunday, and early, there was absolutely no reason to hope for somebody passing by soon.

Like bad men in old movies, the stranger pointed with his gun.

He intended to herd Gary back into the trees.

When the adrenaline struck, Gary's heart nearly burst. Then from some reservoir of courage or stubbornness, or most probably fear, he told his enemy, "No. I'm not doing that."

"Then I'll shoot you here."

"I would," Gary managed. "Because I'm not going anywhere with you."

The stranger had not imagined events happening quite this way. He took a few moments to consider his prospects, licking at his lips while dipping his eyes. Then he whispered, "Fine. I will."

Gary nearly collapsed. But he forced himself to breathe, looking at his enemy's very serious eyes, and with a plaintive voice asked the simple, boundless question, "Why?"

"Why?"

Gary nodded. "Why do this to me? What's your reason?"

The stranger seemed offended. "I have a very good reason."

"Don't I deserve to know?"

The young man saw the logic, or at least in his position of total power, he could afford to say, "I guess so."

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Gary waited.

And with perhaps half a dozen sentences, a life story was told to him — a fanciful tale of conspiracies and farflung enemies, none of it bearing any resemblance to anything genuine and very little that was sane.

Deny any portion of the tale, and his enemy would shoot him. Gary was sure of it.

For a few moments, he couldn't speak. Or think clearly. Weak legs bent, and he settled on the pavement, on his knees, bowing his head while he managed a few ragged breaths. Then with a choking voice, he said, "You're right, yes. You caught me." And he lifted his head, meeting the stranger's gaze.

The pistol dipped.

"I do steal people's DNA. For years and years now." Gary felt detached, like an observer, never quite certain what words his own mouth would say next. "But you have to understand...I don't work for a secret organization. No, no. I work alone. For my own reasons — "

"What reasons?" his enemy snapped.

"Sometimes..." The voice failed him now. What could he possibly say that would help? "Sometimes," he muttered again. Then, "Some people...you know, children...?"

The pistol lifted again.

"Children," Gary repeated. Then his voice recovered its purpose, and he asked, "What if there's a boy, and he has enormous talents and all kinds of potentials...but his home life is miserable. You know? Bad parents and poverty, and if he grows up at all, he'll be too damaged to become half the success he should have been."

Just slightly, his enemy's expression changed.

"I find those boys," Gary lied. "I find them and steal a few of their cells, and I clone them. But I make only one clone for each boy. And I'm very careful to give them full-length telomeres and no serious mutations. Because if you're going to save somebody's life, that's what you need to do."

"Save what life?"

"The boy's," he repeated. Then he managed a smile, adding, "Each baby is adopted by good people...responsible, caring parents...and while their older twins are dying of drugs and ignorance, those lucky few get a second chance at the success they deserve."

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None of this was what the stranger expected, and he didn't know exactly how to respond.

"I know, it's all illegal," said Gary, his smile collapsing.

He was about to be shot, he felt certain.

But then he muttered, "It's just that...if at the end of the day, if I can save just one child...."

There was a long pause.

Then that sick young man dropped his gun, and screaming softly to himself, he ran up the path and out of sight.

Coming Attractions

A man, his past, and a Prius — that's not as catchy as the palindrome "A man, a plan, a canal: Panama," but it accurately sums up "Against the Current," Robert Silverberg's first contribution to our pages in this century. It's nice to have the master back, especially when he's in such fine form.

Also in fine form is Michael Swanwick, whose novelet "Urdumheim" is a Babylonian creation myth. (Yeah, yet *another* one of those! What's that make, six this year?) Fantasy fans, we think you're going to love this one.

Other fantasy stories tentatively planned for next month include Paul Park's haunting "Frangrant Goddess," Daryl Gregory's wild "Unpossible," and Fred Chappell's latest tale of Falco and Astolfo, "The Diamond Shadow." Plus (need we even say it?) lots lots more.

Looking past the anniversary issue and on into 2008, we've got stories in the works by James L. Cambias, Charles Coleman Finlay, Alex Irvine, and Kate Wilhelm. We've also got stories from writers whose names might be unfamiliar to our readers, including David Marusek, David Moles, James Powell, and the writing team of Debra Doyle and James D. Macdonald. Make sure your subscription is current so you won't miss any of the goodies coming in the months ahead.

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SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY VISIT THE METAVERSE AND CHANGE YOUR MIND

IN THE 1992 novel *Snowcrash*, by Neal Stephenson, a character named Hiro Protagonist uses his computer to enter a virtual world called the Metaverse. Hiro enters this world as an avatar, a computer representation of himself. In a virtual nightclub named the Black Sun, he watches as the club owner Da5id opens a "hypercard," which infects not only Da5id's computer system with a virus but also the brain of the person behind Da5id. The computer virus appears as a computer screen full of white noise or snow. Viewing this snow destroys a human brain.

As an astute reader of fantasy and science fiction, you know better than to dismiss this as pure fiction. As you may know, there is a version of the Metaverse available right now. It's called Second Life.

Working with other Exploratorium staff, Paul has built the 'Splo, an Exploratorium-like museum in this world. (Pat has spent time in Second Life, but has been a bit too preoccupied with her First Life, also known as the Real World, to spend any time working on the 'Splo.) In the 'Splo are several exhibits that will change your brain. In this column, we'll tell you a bit about the real Metaverse of Second Life, then we'll discuss how experiences in this virtual world can change the real you in the real world.

INTRODUCING SECOND LIFE

Second Life is a massive multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG, for those who prefer the acronym). Visiting the world of Second Life is free; just go to *www.secondlife.com*, where you can download an application onto your computer. (Of course you will need a powerful computer to handle the computing needs of this Second Life. It's a whole 'nother world, after all.)

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Getting into the world of Second Life is like getting into a novel. You have to make an investment before the story begins to make sense and provides you with a payback. In a novel, you must learn about the characters, which are creations of the novelist. In Second Life, you must create yourself.

First, you design your avatar. You can choose from some prefab avatars or design one yourself by choosing from 100 different values for 80-plus different variables describing your avatar's appearance — from your avatar's height to the thickness of its lips. You can make the avatar like you, or not like you. The choice is yours.

After you enter Second Life, you can hire a plastic surgeon (or learn to be one yourself) and become anything you like. In *Snow-crash*, Neal Stephenson got it right when he said that an avatar could be a "gorilla, a dragon, or a giant talking penis." (Of these choices, Paul has occasionally been a dragon. Pat just runs around as a guy in tie-dyed pants. She really should pay more attention to her wardrobe!)

Once you have designed your body you are no better off than the Terminator who arrived in the world naked. You'll need clothing. Free clothing is available in Second Life. (Where do you think those tie-dyed pants came from?) There is also clothing available for sale for Linden dollars, the currency of Second Life. Linden Dollars can be traded for real dollars ($1 = 250 Linden Dollars in March 2007). If you want to buy nice clothes, you'll need to spend some money. After becoming an avatar and getting dressed, you'll need to learn to walk, to look around, to chat with others, and to fly!

There is a whole world to explore, completely created by its inhabitants. Unlike computer games in which a few people create an experience for you, everyone in Second Life has the ability to create experiences for everyone else. These experiences range from fun to dumb.

Paul's initial experiences in creating experience in Second Life highlight the similarities and the differences between an experience in a real museum, in a museum on the web, and in a virtual museum.

The Museum, the Web, and the Metaverse

On March 29, 2006, the Exploratorium brought live video of a total solar eclipse to residents of the Metaverse — that is, Second

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Life. And in the process, we learned a thing or two.

Let's start by saying that the experience of observing a total solar eclipse is not to be missed. But when the moon eclipses the sun, only the people who happen to be standing on a narrow slice of the Earth averaging a hundred miles wide and a thousand miles long can experience totality.

In March 2006, that narrow slice included Turkey, and the Exploratorium sent a team to cover the event. Paul was the on-site host for the Exploratorium's coverage of the solar eclipse. He stood in an ancient Roman theater in the Turkish town of Side (pronounced see-day) and narrated the eclipse events as the Exploratorium streamed the event live to thousands of visitors at museums around the world, to millions of viewers on the web, and to a hundred viewers in the Metaverse. Consider how these experiences differed from each other.

Paul reports his experience of the real eclipse as follows. During the partial eclipse leading up to totality the light went dim even though there were no clouds in the sky. As totality began, the midday sky went dark and the air became cold. The sun was replaced by a black blob with the ghostly white arms of the solar corona spreading out from the blackness. Even though Paul is a scientist and he knew what was going on, he reports that the hair on his back rose up. On a primal level, he knew that the sun should not vanish from the clear sky. Seeing a total solar eclipse, Paul says, was an amazing experience that changed his perception of the universe. As the first rays of the returning sun peeked through valleys on the Moon to end the eclipse, the audience in the Roman amphitheater cheered.

In the Exploratorium and in museums around the world, thousands of people watched monitors displaying the images sent by the Exploratorium eclipse crew. As the last crescent of the Sun vanished and the image showed the ghostly solar corona, audiences in these museums went quiet, then cheered as they first saw the coronal rays emerging from the sun — and finally erupted in discussion with their neighbors. They asked questions of the museum staff and listened as other people asked questions.

Millions of viewers on the Web watched the Exploratorium's live video of the eclipse. *(http://www.exploratorium.edu/eclipse/2006/index.html)*. People sitting by

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themselves or viewing with friends and family watched the images on their own computer. Using internet search services, people could look for answers to questions.

For the first time during this eclipse the Exploratorium also brought the eclipse into the Metaverse of Second Life. More than a hundred avatars sat in a three-dimensional recreation of the Roman amphitheater to watch the eclipse happen live, and to hear the eclipse program presented by the Exploratorium. (To see the amphitheater in Second Life, visit Kula 4. The Second Life coordinates are 245,252,29. The coordinates are in meters; the Metaverse is metric.)

Just like the audiences in museums, the avatars in Second Life clapped and cheered and danced as totality began. (Some of them flew around or flapped their wings as well!) Then they turned and began talking with each other just like the people at the museums.

These avatars came from all over the world to sit next to each other to watch and discuss the eclipse. An avatar representing a person in Finland sat next to an avatar from someone in Japan. These people could talk about the shape of the spectacular helmet streamers in the corona. They used English for their conversation (although Second Life does have a translator like the Babel fish that Arthur Dent slips into his ear in *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*).

The avatars had access to scientists in Second Life. If people had questions about what they were seeing, they could ask their questions and get them answered immediately. They had two choices for asking questions: they could shout them out publicly so that everyone could hear the question and answer, or they could send their question as a private instant message. The avatars who watched the eclipse in Second Life stayed for an average of one hour apiece. It was immediately apparent to Paul that the virtual world provided a social aspect that was present in the museum experience but missing from most Web sites and that it provided a venue to experiment with new forms of science education.

Building the 'Splo

Inspired by the ability to explore a three-dimensional virtual world with social interactions, Paul decided to build a science museum similar to the Exploratorium in Second Life. This museum, named the 'Splo, opened its doors on April 1,

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2006, an appropriate day for a museum of science, art, and humor. If you have never visited the Exploratorium or a neighborhood hands-on museum, you can now sample the experience in a virtual world and hopefully be inspired to make a visit in the real world. You can even visit the virtual museum with friends who are half the world away.

The 'Splo is housed in an old warehouse built by the great Second Life builder Aimee Weber, whose avatar sports blue butterfly wings. Once a nightclub, the building makes a fine science museum. Its location in Second Life is Midnight City (175,60,26), an island in Second Life where it is always night. Dogs bark, sirens blare, and if you walk in the street, you will be hit by cars. The city includes a movie theater where you can actually watch movies, many stores where you can buy clothing, weapons, and dance animations, and now, a science museum.

A museum in a virtual world presents interesting new possibilities. At the Exploratorium, when we wanted people to observe an illusion that changes when flipped upside down, we mounted the image on a wall so that it can be rotated. In one well-known illusion, for example, an image of lunar craters becomes, when flipped upside down, an image of domes.

A virtual museum offers more interesting possibilities. Instead of flipping the image, you can mount the image on the wall and then flip the visitor upside down! The craters still change into domes. The experience of being flipped upside down to view an illusion is so unique that people exclaim to their friends and start a discussion of what they are seeing that does not end until their friends have flipped upside down to view the illusion themselves.

Second Life also makes it possible to simulate — and warp — real world physics. Avatars at the 'Splo can encounter molecules that are as big as they are. These molecules can move in three dimensions to show how scientists model their behavior. For example, the 'Splo has a carbon dioxide molecule modeled as three spheres with the carbon positioned between the two oxygens. The model can be made to move by bending or by having the carbon molecule shuttle back and forth on the line between the two oxygen molecules to show two of the ways that carbon dioxide gas can absorb infrared radiation, which leads to the greenhouse effect.

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At the opposite end of the size spectrum, Second Life contains an accurate model of the Earth Moon system. A model of Earth one meter in diameter is thirty meters away from a Moon that's one-quarter meter in diameter. Your avatar can walk from the Earth to the small, distant Moon. Do it and you will truly appreciate why eclipses are rare.

Paul is also planning to bring a model to Second Life that will allow him to teach special relativity by slowing down the speed of light to one meter per second.

Change Your Brain

And now it is time to show you that things you experience in Second Life can change your brain. Since optical illusions are easy to build, they are among the first exhibits in the 'Splo. One of these illusions is a rotating spiral.

To build this exhibit, Paul first drew a black-and-white spiral, then saved it as a JPEG. He imported the image into Second Life (which was easy to do and cost only ten Linden Dollars or about 3 cents). He then used the simple building tools in Second Life to create a frame for his image. Finally he wrote a one-command computer program in Linden Scripting language to make the photo frame rotate. He did this during his first few days in Second Life.

Here's how the exhibit works. A visiting avatar moves close to the rotating spiral and the person who owns that avatar and is sitting at the computer screen stares at the spiral for twenty seconds. The person at the computer then looks at a friend's face and sees the friend's face appear to grow or shrink depending on the direction of rotation of the spiral. We could get into a discussion of why this happens — talking about the adaptation of your neurons to constant stimulation — but just now we are more interested in the relationship of reality and the Metaverse. That avatar has no neurons, but the person controlling an avatar in Second Life can look through the eyes of their avatar at an exhibit that changes the person's perception of the real world for a few seconds.

This change only lasted for a few seconds. It is a far cry from erasing a brain with a "snowcrash." But there's another illusion that has a more lasting effect. To see this illusion, which is named the McCollough effect, a viewer stares at an array of horizontal blue lines alternating with an array of vertical yellow lines for five full minutes.

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After this the viewer looks at an array of horizontal and vertical gray lines. The horizontal gray lines appear to be yellow.

The perception that the horizontal gray lines are yellow can last for many days! To experience this illusion on the web go to *http://lite.bu.edu/vision/applets/Color/McCollough/McCollough.html*, where you can see for yourself that an experience in the virtual world can make long lasting changes in your perception.

Finally, a teacher through and through, Paul notes that the process of education itself changes us all. As an example of a permanent change resulting from an experience, Paul cites the following lesson. He warns you to proceed at your own risk. This lesson can forever change your perception of the world! You can never unlearn this!

If you follow these instructions, you will see a small annoying yellow bowtie in the white spaces of every liquid crystal display monitor in your life. (Based on this description, Pat [who is willing to try almost any experiment Paul suggests] respectfully declined this one.)

Here's what you do — if you decide you want to ignore our warnings. Take a piece of white paper out into the sunlight and look at it with one eye through a pair of polarized sunglasses. Rotate the sunglasses about a line between you and the paper. You will see a rotating yellow bowtie on the paper. It's subtle, but if you rotate the sunglasses clockwise and counterclockwise, and you keep looking, you will see it.

This yellow bowtie is called Haidinger's brush and it is how human eyes see polarized light. Although it has been in front of you your whole life, you have probably never seen it before.

After you see Haidinger's brush, go indoors and look at a liquid crystal monitor showing a bright white area. Rotate your head slowly to the right and left and notice the yellow bowtie. It has always been there, but you never saw it before. And now, because you ignored the warning, you can never not see it again. Learning in real life or in the Metaverse may change your brain forever.

The Black Sun

We could tell you much more about the Metaverse in Second Life, but you're probably better off exploring for yourself.

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Paul has an avatar named Patio Plasma. You can often find him at the 'Splo. Pat has an avatar named Zalpha Alphabeta. You can recognize him by his tie-dyed pants, though maybe one of these days she will buy the poor guy some decent clothes.

To bring the discussion back to science fiction (the written kind, rather than the variety you live), Paul notes that he has met an avatar named Hiro Protagonist in Second Life. That individual happens to make his living building and scripting in this virtual world.

Oh, yes — and that bar where Da5id has his brain erased? There's a bar named the Black Sun in Second Life, of course. Maybe we'll see you there.

The Exploratorium is San Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception — where science and science fiction meet. Paul Doherty works there. Pat Murphy used to work there, but now she works at Klutz Press *(www.klutz.com)*, a publisher of how-to books for kids, and The Crucible *(www.thecrucible.org)*, a school of industrial arts and fire arts where she has learned to melt steel and walk on stilts (though not at the same time — at least, not yet). To learn more about Pat Murphy's science fiction writing, visit her web site at *www.brazenhussies.net/murphy*. For more on Paul Doherty's work and his latest adventures, visit *www.exo.net/~pauld*.

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Most of our readers probably know the name Ted Chiang already, but since this story is his first work of fiction to appear here, we should note that Mr. Chiang is the author of such stories as "Division by Zero," "Hell Is the Absence of God," and "Tower of Babylon"; his short fiction has been collected in Stories of Your Life and Others. *His new story — which is going to be published shortly by Subterranean Press in a hardcover chapbook — concerns a Baghdad merchant. Mr. Chiang says the story was inspired in part by the work of physicist Kip Thorne.*

The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate

By Ted Chiang

O MIGHTY CALIPH AND Commander of the Faithful, I am humbled to be in the splendor of your presence; a man can hope for no greater blessing as long as he lives. The story I have to tell is truly a strange one, and were the entirety to be tattooed at the corner of one's eye, the marvel of its presentation would not exceed that of the events recounted, for it is a warning to those who would be warned and a lesson to those who would learn.

My name is Fuwaad ibn Abbas, and I was born here in Baghdad, City of Peace. My father was a grain merchant, but for much of my life I have worked as a purveyor of fine fabrics, trading in silk from Damascus and linen from Egypt and scarves from Morocco that are embroidered with gold. I was prosperous, but my heart was troubled, and neither the purchase of luxuries nor the giving of alms was able to soothe it. Now I stand before you without a single dirham in my purse, but I am at peace.

Allah is the beginning of all things, but with Your Majesty's permission, I begin my story with the day I took a walk through the district of

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metalsmiths. I needed to purchase a gift for a man I had to do business with, and had been told he might appreciate a tray made of silver. After browsing for half an hour, I noticed that one of the largest shops in the market had been taken over by a new merchant. It was a prized location that must have been expensive to acquire, so I entered to peruse its wares.

Never before had I seen such a marvelous assortment of goods. Near the entrance there was an astrolabe equipped with seven plates inlaid with silver, a water-clock that chimed on the hour, and a nightingale made of brass that sang when the wind blew. Farther inside there were even more ingenious mechanisms, and I stared at them the way a child watches a juggler, when an old man stepped out from a doorway in the back.

"Welcome to my humble shop, my lord," he said. "My name is Bashaarat. How may I assist you?"

"These are remarkable items that you have for sale. I deal with traders from every corner of the world, and yet I have never seen their like. From where, may I ask, did you acquire your merchandise?"

"I am grateful to you for your kind words," he said. "Everything you see here was made in my workshop, by myself or by my assistants under my direction."

I was impressed that this man could be so well versed in so many arts. I asked him about the various instruments in his shop, and listened to him discourse learnedly about astrology, mathematics, geomancy, and medicine. We spoke for over an hour, and my fascination and respect bloomed like a flower warmed by the dawn, until he mentioned his experiments in alchemy.

"Alchemy?" I said. This surprised me, for he did not seem the type to make such a sharper's claim. "You mean you can turn base metal into gold?"

"I can, my lord, but that is not in fact what most seek from alchemy."

"What do most seek, then?"

"They seek a source of gold that is cheaper than mining ore from the ground. Alchemy does describe a means to make gold, but the procedure is so arduous that, by comparison, digging beneath a mountain is as easy as plucking peaches from a tree."

I smiled. "A clever reply. No one could dispute that you are a learned man, but I know better than to credit alchemy."

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Bashaarat looked at me and considered. "I have recently built something that may change your opinion. You would be the first person I have shown it to. Would you care to see it?"

"It would be a great pleasure."

"Please follow me." He led me through the doorway in the rear of his shop. The next room was a workshop, arrayed with devices whose functions I could not guess — bars of metal wrapped with enough copper thread to reach the horizon, mirrors mounted on a circular slab of granite floating in quicksilver — but Bashaarat walked past these without a glance.

Instead he led me to a sturdy pedestal, chest high, on which a stout metal hoop was mounted upright. The hoop's opening was as wide as two outstretched hands, and its rim so thick that it would tax the strongest man to carry. The metal was black as night, but polished to such smoothness that, had it been a different color, it could have served as a mirror. Bashaarat bade me stand so that I looked upon the hoop edgewise, while he stood next to its opening.

"Please observe," he said.

Bashaarat thrust his arm through the hoop from the right side, but it did not extend out from the left. Instead, it was as if his arm were severed at the elbow, and he waved the stump up and down, and then pulled his arm out intact.

I had not expected to see such a learned man perform a conjuror's trick, but it was well done, and I applauded politely.

"Now wait a moment," he said as he took a step back.

I waited, and behold, an arm reached out of the hoop from its left side, without a body to hold it up. The sleeve it wore matched Bashaarat's robe. The arm waved up and down, and then retreated through the hoop until it was gone.

The first trick I had thought a clever mime, but this one seemed far superior, because the pedestal and hoop were clearly too slender to conceal a person. "Very clever!" I exclaimed.

"Thank you, but this is not mere sleight of hand. The right side of the hoop precedes the left by several seconds. To pass through the hoop is to cross that duration instantly."

"I do not understand," I said.

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"Let me repeat the demonstration." Again he thrust his arm through the hoop, and his arm disappeared. He smiled, and pulled back and forth as if playing tug-a-rope. Then he pulled his arm out again, and presented his hand to me with the palm open. On it lay a ring I recognized.

"That is my ring!" I checked my hand, and saw that my ring still lay on my finger. "You have conjured up a duplicate."

"No, this is truly your ring. Wait."

Again, an arm reached out from the left side. Wishing to discover the mechanism of the trick, I rushed over to grab it by the hand. It was not a false hand, but one fully warm and alive as mine. I pulled on it, and it pulled back. Then, as deft as a pickpocket, the hand slipped the ring from my finger and the arm withdrew into the hoop, vanishing completely.

"My ring is gone!" I exclaimed.

"No, my lord," he said. "Your ring is here." And he gave me the ring he held. "Forgive me for my game."

I replaced it on my finger. "You had the ring before it was taken from me."

At that moment an arm reached out, this time from the right side of the hoop. "What is this?" I exclaimed. Again I recognized it as his by the sleeve before it withdrew, but I had not seen him reach in.

"Recall," he said, "the right side of the hoop precedes the left." And he walked over to the left side of the hoop, and thrust his arm through from that side, and again it disappeared.

Your Majesty has undoubtedly already grasped this, but it was only then that I understood: whatever happened on the right side of the hoop was complemented, a few seconds later, by an event on the left side. "Is this sorcery?" I asked.

"No, my lord, I have never met a djinni, and if I did, I would not trust it to do my bidding. This is a form of alchemy."

He offered an explanation, speaking of his search for tiny pores in the skin of reality, like the holes that worms bore into wood, and how upon finding one he was able to expand and stretch it the way a glassblower turns a dollop of molten glass into a long-necked pipe, and how he then allowed time to flow like water at one mouth while causing it to thicken like syrup at the other. I confess I did not really understand his words, and cannot testify to their truth. All I could say in response was, "You have created something truly astonishing."

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"Thank you," he said, "but this is merely a prelude to what I intended to show you." He bade me follow him into another room, farther in the back. There stood a circular doorway whose massive frame was made of the same polished black metal, mounted in the middle of the room.

"What I showed you before was a Gate of Seconds," he said. "This is a Gate of Years. The two sides of the doorway are separated by a span of twenty years."

I confess I did not understand his remark immediately. I imagined him reaching his arm in from the right side and waiting twenty years before it emerged from the left side, and it seemed a very obscure magic trick. I said as much, and he laughed. "That is one use for it," he said, "but consider what would happen if you were to step through." Standing on the right side, he gestured for me to come closer, and then pointed through the doorway. "Look."

I looked, and saw that there appeared to be different rugs and pillows on the other side of the room than I had seen when I had entered. I moved my head from side to side, and realized that when I peered through the doorway, I was looking at a different room from the one I stood in.

"You are seeing the room twenty years from now," said Bashaarat.

I blinked, as one might at an illusion of water in the desert, but what I saw did not change. "And you say I could step through?" I asked.

"You could. And with that step, you would visit the Baghdad of twenty years hence. You could seek out your older self and have a conversation with him. Afterwards, you could step back through the Gate of Years and return to the present day."

Hearing Bashaarat's words, I felt as if I were reeling. "You have done this?" I asked him. "You have stepped through?"

"I have, and so have numerous customers of mine."

"Earlier you said I was the first to whom you showed this."

"This Gate, yes. But for many years I owned a shop in Cairo, and it was there that I first built a Gate of Years. There were many to whom I showed that Gate, and who made use of it."

"What did they learn when talking to their older selves?"

"Each person learns something different. If you wish, I can tell you the story of one such person." Bashaarat proceeded to tell me such a story, and if it pleases Your Majesty, I will recount it here.

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The Tale of the Fortunate Rope-Maker

THERE ONCE WAS a young man named Hassan who was a maker of rope. He stepped through the Gate of Years to see the Cairo of twenty years later, and upon arriving he marveled at how the city had grown. He felt as if he had stepped into a scene embroidered on a tapestry, and even though the city was no more and no less than Cairo, he looked upon the most common sights as objects of wonder.

He was wandering by the Zuweyla Gate, where the sword dancers and snake charmers perform, when an astrologer called to him. "Young man! Do you wish to know the future?"

Hassan laughed. "I know it already," he said.

"Surely you want to know if wealth awaits you, do you not?"

"I am a rope-maker. I know that it does not."

"Can you be so sure? What about the renowned merchant Hassan al-Hubbaul, who began as a rope-maker?"

His curiosity aroused, Hassan asked around the market for others who knew of this wealthy merchant, and found that the name was well known. It was said he lived in the wealthy Habbaniya quarter of the city, so Hassan walked there and asked people to point out his house, which turned out to be the largest one on its street.

He knocked at the door, and a servant led him to a spacious and well-appointed hall with a fountain in the center. Hassan waited while the servant went to fetch his master, but as he looked at the polished ebony and marble around him, he felt that he did not belong in such surroundings, and was about to leave when his older self appeared.

"At last you are here!" the man said. "I have been expecting you!"

"You have?" said Hassan, astounded.

"Of course, because I visited my older self just as you are visiting me. It has been so long that I had forgotten the exact day. Come, dine with me."

The two went to a dining room, where servants brought chicken stuffed with pistachio nuts, fritters soaked in honey, and roast lamb with spiced pomegranates. The older Hassan gave few details of his life: he mentioned business interests of many varieties, but did not say how he

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had become a merchant; he mentioned a wife, but said it was not time for the younger man to meet her. Instead, he asked young Hassan to remind him of the pranks he had played as a child, and he laughed to hear stories that had faded from his own memory.

At last the younger Hassan asked the older, "How did you make such great changes in your fortune?"

"All I will tell you right now is this: when you go to buy hemp from the market, and you are walking along the Street of Black Dogs, do not walk along the south side as you usually do. Walk along the north."

"And that will enable me to raise my station?"

"Just do as I say. Go back home now; you have rope to make. You will know when to visit me again."

Young Hassan returned to his day and did as he was instructed, keeping to the north side of the street even when there was no shade there. It was a few days later that he witnessed a maddened horse run amok on the south side of the street directly opposite him, kicking several people, injuring another by knocking a heavy jug of palm oil onto him, and even trampling one person under its hooves. After the commotion had subsided, Hassan prayed to Allah for the injured to be healed and the dead to be at peace, and thanked Allah for sparing him.

The next day Hassan stepped through the Gate of Years and sought out his older self. "Were you injured by the horse when you walked by?" he asked him.

"No, because I heeded my older self's warning. Do not forget, you and I are one; every circumstance that befalls you once befell me."

And so the elder Hassan gave the younger instructions, and the younger obeyed them. He refrained from buying eggs from his usual grocer, and thus avoided the illness that struck customers who bought eggs from a spoiled basket. He bought extra hemp, and thus had material to work with when others suffered a shortage due to a delayed caravan. Following his older self's instructions spared Hassan many troubles, but he wondered why his older self would not tell him more. Who would he marry? How would he become wealthy?

Then one day, after having sold all his rope in the market and carrying an unusually full purse, Hassan bumped into a boy while walking on the street. He felt for his purse, discovered it missing, and turned around with

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a shout to search the crowd for the pickpocket. Hearing Hassan's cry, the boy immediately began running through the crowd. Hassan saw that the boy's tunic was torn at the elbow, but then quickly lost sight of him.

For a moment Hassan was shocked that this could happen with no warning from his older self. But his surprise was soon replaced by anger, and he gave chase. He ran through the crowd, checking the elbows of boys' tunics, until by chance he found the pickpocket crouching beneath a fruit wagon. Hassan grabbed him and began shouting to all that he had caught a thief, asking them to find a guardsman. The boy, afraid of arrest, dropped Hassan's purse and began weeping. Hassan stared at the boy for a long moment, and then his anger faded, and he let him go.

When next he saw his older self, Hassan asked him, "Why did you not warn me about the pickpocket?"

"Did you not enjoy the experience?" asked his older self.

Hassan was about to deny it, but stopped himself. "I did enjoy it," he admitted. In pursuing the boy, with no hint of whether he'd succeed or fail, he had felt his blood surge in a way it had not for many weeks. And seeing the boy's tears had reminded him of the Prophet's teachings on the value of mercy, and Hassan had felt virtuous in choosing to let the boy go.

"Would you rather I had denied you that, then?"

Just as we grow to understand the purpose of customs that seemed pointless to us in our youth, Hassan realized that there was merit in withholding information as well as in disclosing it. "No," he said, "it was good that you did not warn me."

The older Hassan saw that he had understood. "Now I will tell you something very important. Hire a horse. I will give you directions to a spot in the foothills to the west of the city. There you will find within a grove of trees one that was struck by lightning. Around the base of the tree, look for the heaviest rock you can overturn, and then dig beneath it."

"What should I look for?"

"You will know when you find it."

The next day Hassan rode out to the foothills and searched until he found the tree. The ground around it was covered in rocks, so Hassan overturned one to dig beneath it, and then another, and then another. At last his spade struck something besides rock and soil. He cleared aside the soil and discovered a bronze chest, filled with gold dinars and assorted

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jewelry. Hassan had never seen its like in all his life. He loaded the chest onto the horse, and rode back to Cairo.

The next time he spoke to his older self, he asked, "How did you know where the treasure was?"

"I learned it from myself," said the older Hassan, "just as you did. As to how we came to know its location, I have no explanation except that it was the will of Allah, and what other explanation is there for anything?"

"I swear I shall make good use of these riches that Allah has blessed me with," said the younger Hassan.

"And I renew that oath," said the older. "This is the last time we shall speak. You will find your own way now. Peace be upon you."

And so Hassan returned home. With the gold he was able to purchase hemp in great quantity, and hire workmen and pay them a fair wage, and sell rope profitably to all who sought it. He married a beautiful and clever woman, at whose advice he began trading in other goods, until he was a wealthy and respected merchant. All the while he gave generously to the poor and lived as an upright man. In this way Hassan lived the happiest of lives until he was overtaken by death, breaker of ties and destroyer of delights.

"That is a remarkable story," I said. "For someone who is debating whether to make use of the Gate, there could hardly be a better inducement."

"You are wise to be skeptical," said Bashaarat. "Allah rewards those he wishes to reward and chastises those he wishes to chastise. The Gate does not change how he regards you."

I nodded, thinking I understood. "So even if you succeed in avoiding the misfortunes that your older self experienced, there is no assurance you will not encounter other misfortunes."

"No, forgive an old man for being unclear. Using the Gate is not like drawing lots, where the token you select varies with each turn. Rather, using the Gate is like taking a secret passageway in a palace, one that lets you enter a room more quickly than by walking down the hallway. The room remains the same, no matter which door you use to enter."

This surprised me. "The future is fixed, then? As unchangeable as the past?"

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"It is said that repentance and atonement erase the past."

"I have heard that too, but I have not found it to be true."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Bashaarat. "All I can say is that the future is no different."

I thought on this for a while. "So if you learn that you are dead twenty years from now, there is nothing you can do to avoid your death?" He nodded. This seemed to me very disheartening, but then I wondered if it could not also provide a guarantee. I said, "Suppose you learn that you are alive twenty years from now. Then nothing could kill you in the next twenty years. You could then fight in battles without a care, because your survival is assured."

"That is possible," he said. "It is also possible that a man who would make use of such a guarantee would not find his older self alive when he first used the Gate."

"Ah," I said. "Is it then the case that only the prudent meet their older selves?"

"Let me tell you the story of another person who used the Gate, and you can decide for yourself if he was prudent or not." Bashaarat proceeded to tell me the story, and if it pleases Your Majesty, I will recount it here.

The Tale of the Weaver Who Stole from Himself

THERE WAS a young weaver named Ajib who made a modest living as a weaver of rugs, but yearned to taste the luxuries enjoyed by the wealthy. After hearing the story of Hassan, Ajib immediately stepped through the Gate of Years to seek out his older self, who, he was sure, would be as rich and as generous as the older Hassan.

Upon arriving in the Cairo of twenty years later, he proceeded to the wealthy Habbaniya quarter of the city and asked people for the residence of Ajib ibn Taher. He was prepared, if he met someone who knew the man and remarked on the similarity of their features, to identify himself as Ajib's son, newly arrived from Damascus. But he never had the chance to offer this story, because no one he asked recognized the name.

Eventually he decided to return to his old neighborhood, and see if anyone there knew where he had moved to. When he got to his old street,

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he stopped a boy and asked him if he knew where to find a man named Ajib. The boy directed him to Ajib's old house.

"That is where he used to live," Ajib said. "Where does he live now?"

"If he has moved since yesterday, I do not know where," said the boy.

Ajib was incredulous. Could his older self still live in the same house, twenty years later? That would mean he had never become wealthy, and his older self would have no advice to give him, or at least none Ajib would profit by following. How could his fate differ so much from that of the fortunate rope-maker? In hopes that the boy was mistaken, Ajib waited outside the house, and watched.

Eventually he saw a man leave the house, and with a sinking heart recognized it as his older self. The older Ajib was followed by a woman that he presumed was his wife, but he scarcely noticed her, for all he could see was his own failure to have bettered himself. He stared with dismay at the plain clothes the older couple wore until they walked out of sight.

Driven by the curiosity that impels men to look at the heads of the executed, Ajib went to the door of his house. His own key still fit the lock, so he entered. The furnishings had changed, but were simple and worn, and Ajib was mortified to see them. After twenty years, could he not even afford better pillows?

On an impulse, he went to the wooden chest where he normally kept his savings, and unlocked it. He lifted the lid, and saw the chest was filled with gold dinars.

Ajib was astonished. His older self had a chest of gold, and yet he wore such plain clothes and lived in the same small house for twenty years! What a stingy, joyless man his older self must be, thought Ajib, to have wealth and not enjoy it. Ajib had long known that one could not take one's possessions to the grave. Could that be something that he would forget as he aged?

Ajib decided that such riches should belong to someone who appreciated them, and that was himself. To take his older self's wealth would not be stealing, he reasoned, because it was he himself who would receive it. He heaved the chest onto his shoulder, and with much effort was able to bring it back through the Gate of Years to the Cairo he knew.

He deposited some of his new found wealth with a banker, but always carried a purse heavy with gold. He dressed in a Damascene robe and

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Cordovan slippers and a Khurasani turban bearing a jewel. He rented a house in the wealthy quarter, furnished it with the finest rugs and couches, and hired a cook to prepare him sumptuous meals.

He then sought out the brother of a woman he had long desired from afar, a woman named Taahira. Her brother was an apothecary, and Taahira assisted him in his shop. Ajib would occasionally purchase a remedy so that he might speak to her. Once he had seen her veil slip, and her eyes were as dark and beautiful as a gazelle's. Taahira's brother would not have consented to her marrying a weaver, but now Ajib could present himself as a favorable match.

Taahira's brother approved, and Taahira herself readily consented, for she had desired Ajib, too. Ajib spared no expense for their wedding. He hired one of the pleasure barges that floated in the canal south of the city and held a feast with musicians and dancers, at which he presented her with a magnificent pearl necklace. The celebration was the subject of gossip throughout the quarter.

Ajib reveled in the joy that money brought him and Taahira, and for a week the two of them lived the most delightful of lives. Then one day Ajib came home to find the door to his house broken open and the interior ransacked of all silver and gold items. The terrified cook emerged from hiding and told him that robbers had taken Taahira.

Ajib prayed to Allah until, exhausted with worry, he fell asleep. The next morning he was awoken by a knocking at his door. There was a stranger there. "I have a message for you," the man said.

"What message?" asked Ajib.

"Your wife is safe."

Ajib felt fear and rage churn in his stomach like black bile. "What ransom would you have?" he asked.

"Ten thousand dinars."

"That is more than all I possess!" Ajib exclaimed.

"Do not haggle with me," said the robber. "I have seen you spend money like others pour water."

Ajib dropped to his knees. "I have been wasteful. I swear by the name of the Prophet that I do not have that much," he said.

The robber looked at him closely. "Gather all the money you have," he said, "and have it here tomorrow at this same hour. If I believe you are

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holding back, your wife will die. If I believe you to be honest, my men will return her to you."

Ajib could see no other choice. "Agreed," he said, and the robber left.

The next day he went to the banker and withdrew all the money that remained. He gave it to the robber, who gauged the desperation in Ajib's eyes and was satisfied. The robber did as he promised, and that evening Taahira was returned.

After they had embraced, Taahira said, "I didn't believe you would pay so much money for me."

"I could not take pleasure in it without you," said Ajib, and he was surprised to realize it was true. "But now I regret that I cannot buy you what you deserve."

"You need never buy me anything again," she said.

Ajib bowed his head. "I feel as if I have been punished for my misdeeds."

"What misdeeds?" asked Taahira, but Ajib said nothing. "I did not ask you this before," she said. "But I know you did not inherit all the money you gained. Tell me: did you steal it?"

"No," said Ajib, unwilling to admit the truth to her or himself. "It was given to me."

"A loan, then?"

"No, it does not need to be repaid."

"And you don't wish to pay it back?" Taahira was shocked. "So you are content that this other man paid for our wedding? That he paid my ransom?" She seemed on the verge of tears. "Am I your wife then, or this other man's?"

"You are my wife," he said.

"How can I be, when my very life is owed to another?"

"I would not have you doubt my love," said Ajib. "I swear to you that I will pay back the money, to the last dirham."

And so Ajib and Taahira moved back into Ajib's old house and began saving their money. Both of them went to work for Taahira's brother the apothecary, and when he eventually became a perfumer to the wealthy, Ajib and Taahira took over the business of selling remedies to the ill. It was a good living, but they spent as little as they could, living modestly and repairing damaged furnishings instead of buying new. For years, Ajib

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smiled whenever he dropped a coin into the chest, telling Taahira that it was a reminder of how much he valued her. He would say that even after the chest was full, it would be a bargain.

But it is not easy to fill a chest by adding just a few coins at a time, and so what began as thrift gradually turned into miserliness, and prudent decisions were replaced by tight-fisted ones. Worse, Ajib's and Taahira's affections for each other faded over time, and each grew to resent the other for the money they could not spend.

In this manner the years passed and Ajib grew older, waiting for the second time that his gold would be taken from him.

"What a strange and sad story," I said.

"Indeed," said Bashaarat. "Would you say that Ajib acted prudently?"

I hesitated before speaking. "It is not my place to judge him," I said. "He must live with the consequences of his actions, just as I must live with mine." I was silent for a moment, and then said, "I admire Ajib's candor, that he told you everything he had done."

"Ah, but Ajib did not tell me of this as a young man," said Bashaarat. "After he emerged from the Gate carrying the chest, I did not see him again for another twenty years. Ajib was a much older man when he came to visit me again. He had come home and found his chest gone, and the knowledge that he had paid his debt made him feel he could tell me all that had transpired."

"Indeed? Did the older Hassan from your first story come to see you as well?"

"No, I heard Hassan's story from his younger self. The older Hassan never returned to my shop, but in his place I had a different visitor, one who shared a story about Hassan that he himself could never have told me." Bashaarat proceeded to tell me that visitor's story, and if it pleases Your Majesty, I will recount it here.

The Tale of the Wife and Her Lover

Raniya had been married to Hassan for many years, and they lived the happiest of lives. One day she saw her husband dine with a young man, whom she recognized as the very image of Hassan when she had first

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married him. So great was her astonishment that she could scarcely keep herself from intruding on their conversation. After the young man left, she demanded that Hassan tell her who he was, and Hassan related to her an incredible tale.

"Have you told him about me?" she asked. "Did you know what lay ahead of us when we first met?"

"I knew I would marry you from the moment I saw you," Hassan said, smiling, "but not because anyone had told me. Surely, wife, you would not wish to spoil that moment for him?"

So Raniya did not speak to her husband's younger self, but only eavesdropped on his conversation, and stole glances at him. Her pulse quickened at the sight of his youthful features; sometimes our memories fool us with their sweetness, but when she beheld the two men seated opposite each other, she could see the fullness of the younger one's beauty without exaggeration. At night, she would lie awake, thinking of it.

Some days after Hassan had bid farewell to his younger self, he left Cairo to conduct business with a merchant in Damascus. In his absence Raniya found the shop that Hassan had described to her, and stepped through the Gate of Years to the Cairo of her youth.

She remembered where he had lived back then, and so was easily able to find the young Hassan and follow him. As she watched him, she felt a desire stronger than she had felt in years for the older Hassan, so vivid were her recollections of their youthful lovemaking. She had always been a loyal and faithful wife, but here was an opportunity that would never be available again. Resolving to act on this desire, Raniya rented a house, and in subsequent days bought furnishings for it.

Once the house was ready, she followed Hassan discreetly while she tried to gather enough boldness to approach him. In the jewelers' market, she watched as he went to a jeweler, showed him a necklace set with ten gemstones, and asked him how much he would pay for it. Raniya recognized it as one Hassan had given to her in the days after their wedding; she had not known he had once tried to sell it. She stood a short distance away and listened, pretending to look at some rings.

"Bring it back tomorrow, and I will pay you a thousand dinars," said the jeweler. Young Hassan agreed to the price, and left.

As she watched him leave, Raniya overheard two men talking nearby:

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"Did you see that necklace? It is one of ours."

"Are you certain?" asked the other.

"I am. That is the bastard who dug up our chest."

"Let us tell our captain about him. After this fellow has sold his necklace, we will take his money, and more."

The two men left without noticing Raniya, who stood with her heart racing but her body motionless, like a deer after a tiger has passed. She realized that the treasure Hassan had dug up must have belonged to a band of thieves, and these men were two of its members. They were now observing the jewelers of Cairo to identify the person who had taken their loot.

Raniya knew that since she possessed the necklace, the young Hassan could not have sold it. She also knew that the thieves could not have killed Hassan. But it could not be Allah's will for her to do nothing. Allah must have brought her here so that he might use her as his instrument.

Raniya returned to the Gate of Years, stepped through to her own day, and at her house found the necklace in her jewelry box. Then she used the Gate of Years again, but instead of entering it from the left side, she entered it from the right, so that she visited the Cairo of twenty years later. There she sought out her older self, now an aged woman. The older Raniya greeted her warmly, and retrieved the necklace from her own jewelry box. The two women then rehearsed how they would assist the young Hassan.

The next day, the two thieves were back with a third man, whom Raniya assumed was their captain. They all watched as Hassan presented the necklace to the jeweler.

As the jeweler examined it, Raniya walked up and said, "What a coincidence! Jeweler, I wish to sell a necklace just like that." She brought out her necklace from a purse she carried.

"This is remarkable," said the jeweler. "I have never seen two necklaces more similar."

Then the aged Raniya walked up. "What do I see? Surely my eyes deceive me!" And with that she brought out a third identical necklace. "The seller sold it to me with the promise that it was unique. This proves him a liar."

"Perhaps you should return it," said Raniya.

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"That depends," said the aged Raniya. She asked Hassan, "How much is he paying you for it?"

"A thousand dinars," said Hassan, bewildered.

"Really! Jeweler, would you care to buy this one too?"

"I must reconsider my offer," said the jeweler.

While Hassan and the aged Raniya bargained with the jeweler, Raniya stepped back just far enough to hear the captain berate the other thieves. "You fools," he said. "It is a common necklace. You would have us kill half the jewelers in Cairo and bring the guardsmen down upon our heads." He slapped their heads and led them off.

Raniya returned her attention to the jeweler, who had withdrawn his offer to buy Hassan's necklace. The older Raniya said, "Very well. I will try to return it to the man who sold it to me." As the older woman left, Raniya could tell that she smiled beneath her veil.

Raniya turned to Hassan. "It appears that neither of us will sell a necklace today."

"Another day, perhaps," said Hassan.

"I shall take mine back to my house for safekeeping," said Raniya. "Would you walk with me?"

Hassan agreed, and walked with Raniya to the house she had rented. Then she invited him in, and offered him wine, and after they had both drunk some, she led him to her bedroom. She covered the windows with heavy curtains and extinguished all lamps so that the room was as dark as night. Only then did she remove her veil and take him to bed.

Raniya had been flush with anticipation for this moment, and so was surprised to find that Hassan's movements were clumsy and awkward. She remembered their wedding night very clearly; he had been confident, and his touch had taken her breath away. She knew Hassan's first meeting with the young Raniya was not far away, and for a moment did not understand how this fumbling boy could change so quickly. And then of course the answer was clear.

So every afternoon for many days, Raniya met Hassan at her rented house and instructed him in the art of love, and in doing so she demonstrated that, as is often said, women are Allah's most wondrous creation. She told him, "The pleasure you give is returned in the pleasure you receive," and inwardly she smiled as she thought of how true her words

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really were. Before long, he gained the expertise she remembered, and she took greater enjoyment in it than she had as a young woman.

All too soon, the day arrived when Raniya told the young Hassan that it was time for her to leave. He knew better than to press her for her reasons, but asked her if they might ever see each other again. She told him, gently, no. Then she sold the furnishings to the house's owner, and returned through the Gate of Years to the Cairo of her own day.

When the older Hassan returned from his trip to Damascus, Raniya was home waiting for him. She greeted him warmly, but kept her secrets to herself.

I was lost in my own thoughts when Bashaarat finished this story, until he said, "I see that this story has intrigued you in a way the others did not."

"You see clearly," I admitted. "I realize now that, even though the past is unchangeable, one may encounter the unexpected when visiting it."

"Indeed. Do you now understand why I say the future and the past are the same? We cannot change either, but we can know both more fully."

"I do understand; you have opened my eyes, and now I wish to use the Gate of Years. What price do you ask?"

He waved his hand. "I do not sell passage through the Gate," he said. "Allah guides whom he wishes to my shop, and I am content to be an instrument of his will."

Had it been another man, I would have taken his words to be a negotiating ploy, but after all that Bashaarat had told me, I knew that he was sincere. "Your generosity is as boundless as your learning," I said, and bowed. "If there is ever a service that a merchant of fabrics might provide for you, please call upon me."

"Thank you. Let us talk now about your trip. There are some matters we must speak of before you visit the Baghdad of twenty years hence."

"I do not wish to visit the future," I told him. "I would step through in the other direction, to revisit my youth."

"Ah, my deepest apologies. This Gate will not take you there. You see, I built this Gate only a week ago. Twenty years ago, there was no doorway here for you to step out of."

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My dismay was so great that I must have sounded like a forlorn child. I said, "But where does the other side of the Gate lead?" and walked around the circular doorway to face its opposite side.

Bashaarat walked around the doorway to stand beside me. The view through the Gate appeared identical to the view outside it, but when he extended his hand to reach through, it stopped as if it met an invisible wall. I looked more closely, and noticed a brass lamp set on a table. Its flame did not flicker, but was as fixed and unmoving as if the room were trapped in clearest amber.

"What you see here is the room as it appeared last week," said Bashaarat. "In some twenty years' time, this left side of the Gate will permit entry, allowing people to enter from this direction and visit their past. Or," he said, leading me back to the side of the doorway he had first shown me, "we can enter from the right side now, and visit them ourselves. But I'm afraid this Gate will never allow visits to the days of your youth."

"What about the Gate of Years you had in Cairo?" I asked.

He nodded. "That Gate still stands. My son now runs my shop there."

"So I could travel to Cairo, and use the Gate to visit the Cairo of twenty years ago. From there I could travel back to Baghdad."

"Yes, you could make that journey, if you so desire."

"I do," I said. "Will you tell me how to find your shop in Cairo?"

"We must speak of some things first," said Bashaarat. "I will not ask your intentions, being content to wait until you are ready to tell me. But I would remind you that what is made cannot be unmade."

"I know," I said.

"And that you cannot avoid the ordeals that are assigned to you. What Allah gives you, you must accept."

"I remind myself of that every day of my life."

"Then it is my honor to assist you in whatever way I can," he said.

He brought out some paper and a pen and inkpot and began writing. "I shall write for you a letter to aid you on your journey." He folded the letter, dribbled some candle wax over the edge, and pressed his ring against it. "When you reach Cairo, give this to my son, and he will let you enter the Gate of Years there."

A merchant such as myself must be well-versed in expressions of

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gratitude, but I had never before been as effusive in giving thanks as I was to Bashaarat, and every word was heartfelt. He gave me directions to his shop in Cairo, and I assured him I would tell him all upon my return. As I was about to leave his shop, a thought occurred to me. "Because the Gate of Years you have here opens to the future, you are assured that the Gate and this shop will be remain standing for twenty years or more."

"Yes, that is true," said Bashaarat.

I began to ask him if he had met his older self, but then I bit back my words. If the answer was no, it was surely because his older self was dead, and I would be asking him if he knew the date of his death. Who was I to make such an inquiry, when this man was granting me a boon without asking my intentions? I saw from his expression that he knew what I had meant to ask, and I bowed my head in humble apology. He indicated his acceptance with a nod, and I returned home to make arrangements.

The caravan took two months to reach Cairo. As for what occupied my mind during the journey, Your Majesty, I now tell you what I had not told Bashaarat. I was married once, twenty years before, to a woman named Najya. Her figure swayed as gracefully as a willow bough and her face was as lovely as the moon, but it was her kind and tender nature that captured my heart. I had just begun my career as a merchant when we married, and we were not wealthy, but did not feel the lack.

We had been married only a year when I was to travel to Basra to meet with a ship's captain. I had an opportunity to profit by trading in slaves, but Najya did not approve. I reminded her that the Koran does not forbid the owning of slaves as long as one treats them well, and that even the Prophet owned some. But she said there was no way I could know how my buyers would treat their slaves, and that it was better to sell goods than men.

On the morning of my departure, Najya and I argued. I spoke harshly to her, using words that it shames me to recall, and I beg Your Majesty's forgiveness if I do not repeat them here. I left in anger, and never saw her again. She was badly injured when the wall of a mosque collapsed, some days after I left. She was taken to the bimaristan, but the physicians could not save her, and she died soon after. I did not learn of her death until I returned a week later, and I felt as if I had killed her with my own hand.

Can the torments of Hell be worse than what I endured in the days

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that followed? It seemed likely that I would find out, so near to death did my anguish take me. And surely the experience must be similar, for like infernal fire, grief burns but does not consume; instead, it makes the heart vulnerable to further suffering.

Eventually my period of lamentation ended, and I was left a hollow man, a bag of skin with no innards. I freed the slaves I had bought and became a fabric merchant. Over the years I became wealthy, but I never remarried. Some of the men I did business with tried to match me with a sister or a daughter, telling me that the love of a woman can make you forget your pains. Perhaps they are right, but it cannot make you forget the pain you caused another. Whenever I imagined myself marrying another woman, I remembered the look of hurt in Najya's eyes when I last saw her, and my heart was closed to others.

I spoke to a mullah about what I had done, and it was he who told me that repentance and atonement erase the past. I repented and atoned as best I knew how; for twenty years I lived as an upright man, I offered prayers and fasted and gave alms to those less fortunate and made a pilgrimage to Mecca, and yet I was still haunted by guilt. Allah is all-merciful, so I knew the failing to be mine.

Had Bashaarat asked me, I could not have said what I hoped to achieve. It was clear from his stories that I could not change what I knew to have happened. No one had stopped my younger self from arguing with Najya in our final conversation. But the tale of Raniya, which lay hidden within the tale of Hassan's life without his knowing it, gave me a slim hope: perhaps I might be able to play some part in events while my younger self was away on business.

Could it not be that there had been a mistake, and my Najya had survived? Perhaps it was another woman whose body had been wrapped in a shroud and buried while I was gone. Perhaps I could rescue Najya and bring her back with me to the Baghdad of my own day. I knew it was foolhardy; men of experience say, "Four things do not come back: the spoken word, the sped arrow, the past life, and the neglected opportunity," and I understood the truth of those words better than most. And yet I dared to hope that Allah had judged my twenty years of repentance sufficient, and was now granting me a chance to regain what I had lost.

The caravan journey was uneventful, and after sixty sunrises and

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three hundred prayers, I reached Cairo. There I had to navigate the city's streets, which are a bewildering maze compared to the harmonious design of the City of Peace. I made my way to the Bayn al-Qasrayn, the main street that runs through the Fatimid quarter of Cairo. From there I found the street on which Bashaarat's shop was located.

I told the shopkeeper that I had spoken to his father in Baghdad, and gave him the letter Bashaarat had given me. After reading it, he led me into a back room, in whose center stood another Gate of Years, and he gestured for me to enter from its left side.

As I stood before the massive circle of metal, I felt a chill, and chided myself for my nervousness. With a deep breath I stepped through, and found myself in the same room with different furnishings. If not for those, I would not have known the Gate to be different from an ordinary doorway. Then I recognized that the chill I had felt was simply the coolness of the air in this room, for the day here was not as hot as the day I had left. I could feel its warm breeze at my back, coming through the Gate like a sigh.

The shopkeeper followed behind me and called out, "Father, you have a visitor."

A man entered the room, and who should it be but Bashaarat, twenty years younger than when I'd seen him in Baghdad. "Welcome, my lord," he said. "I am Bashaarat."

"You do not know me?" I asked.

"No, you must have met my older self. For me, this is our first meeting, but it is my honor to assist you."

Your Majesty, as befits this chronicle of my shortcomings, I must confess that, so immersed was I in my own woes during the journey from Baghdad, I had not previously realized that Bashaarat had likely recognized me the moment I stepped into his shop. Even as I was admiring his water-clock and brass songbird, he had known that I would travel to Cairo, and likely knew whether I had achieved my goal or not.

The Bashaarat I spoke to now knew none of those things. "I am doubly grateful for your kindness, sir," I said. "My name is Fuwaad ibn Abbas, newly arrived from Baghdad."

Bashaarat's son took his leave, and Bashaarat and I conferred; I asked him the day and month, confirming that there was ample time for me to

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travel back to the City of Peace, and promised him I would tell him everything when I returned. His younger self was as gracious as his older. "I look forward to speaking with you on your return, and to assisting you again twenty years from now," he said.

His words gave me pause. "Had you planned to open a shop in Baghdad before today?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I had been marveling at the coincidence that we met in Baghdad just in time for me to make my journey here, use the Gate, and travel back. But now I wonder if it is perhaps not a coincidence at all. Is my arrival here today the reason that you will move to Baghdad twenty years from now?"

Bashaarat smiled. "Coincidence and intention are two sides of a tapestry, my lord. You may find one more agreeable to look at, but you cannot say one is true and the other is false."

"Now as ever, you have given me much to think about," I said.

I thanked him and bid farewell. As I was leaving his shop, I passed a woman entering with some haste. I heard Bashaarat greet her as Raniya, and stopped in surprise.

From just outside the door, I could hear the woman say, "I have the necklace. I hope my older self has not lost it."

"I am sure you will have kept it safe, in anticipation of your visit," said Bashaarat.

I realized that this was Raniya from the story Bashaarat had told me. She was on her way to collect her older self so that they might return to the days of their youth, confound some thieves with a doubled necklace, and save their husband. For a moment I was unsure if I were dreaming or awake, because I felt as if I had stepped into a tale, and the thought that I might talk to its players and partake of its events was dizzying. I was tempted to speak, and see if I might play a hidden role in that tale, but then I remembered that my goal was to play a hidden role in my own tale. So I left without a word, and went to arrange passage with a caravan.

It is said, Your Majesty, that Fate laughs at men's schemes. At first it appeared as if I were the most fortunate of men, for a caravan headed for Baghdad was departing within the month, and I was able to join it. In the weeks that followed I began to curse my luck, because the caravan's journey was plagued by delays. The wells at a town not far from Cairo were

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dry, and an expedition had to be sent back for water. At another village, the soldiers protecting the caravan contracted dysentery, and we had to wait for weeks for their recovery. With each delay, I revised my estimate of when we'd reach Baghdad, and grew increasingly anxious.

Then there were the sandstorms, which seemed like a warning from Allah, and truly caused me to doubt the wisdom of my actions. We had the good fortune to be resting at a caravanserai west of Kufa when the sandstorms first struck, but our stay was prolonged from days to weeks as, time and again, the skies became clear, only to darken again as soon as the camels were reloaded. The day of Najya's accident was fast approaching, and I grew desperate.

I solicited each of the camel drivers in turn, trying to hire one to take me ahead alone, but could not persuade any of them. Eventually I found one willing to sell me a camel at what would have been an exorbitant price under ordinary circumstances, but which I was all too willing to pay. I then struck out on my own.

It will come as no surprise that I made little progress in the storm, but when the winds subsided, I immediately adopted a rapid pace. Without the soldiers that accompanied the caravan, however, I was an easy target for bandits, and sure enough, I was stopped after two days' ride. They took my money and the camel I had purchased, but spared my life, whether out of pity or because they could not be bothered to kill me I do not know. I began walking back to rejoin the caravan, but now the skies tormented me with their cloudlessness, and I suffered from the heat. By the time the caravan found me, my tongue was swollen and my lips were as cracked as mud baked by the sun. After that I had no choice but to accompany the caravan at its usual pace.

Like a fading rose that drops its petals one by one, my hopes dwindled with each passing day. By the time the caravan reached the City of Peace, I knew it was too late, but the moment we rode through the city gates, I asked the guardsmen if they had heard of a mosque collapsing. The first guardsman I spoke to had not, and for a heartbeat I dared to hope that I had misremembered the date of the accident, and that I had in fact arrived in time.

Then another guardsman told me that a mosque had indeed collapsed just yesterday in the Karkh quarter. His words struck me with the force

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of the executioner's axe. I had traveled so far, only to receive the worst news of my life a second time.

I walked to the mosque, and saw the piles of bricks where there had once been a wall. It was a scene that had haunted my dreams for twenty years, but now the image remained even after I opened my eyes, and with a clarity sharper than I could endure. I turned away and walked without aim, blind to what was around me, until I found myself before my old house, the one where Najya and I had lived. I stood in the street in front of it, filled with memory and anguish.

I do not know how much time had passed when I became aware that a young woman had walked up to me. "My lord," she said, "I'm looking for the house of Fuwaad ibn Abbas."

"You have found it," I said.

"Are you Fuwaad ibn Abbas, my lord?"

"I am, and I ask you, please leave me be."

"My lord, I beg your forgiveness. My name is Maimuna, and I assist the physicians at the bimaristan. I tended to your wife before she died."

I turned to look at her. "You tended to Najya?"

"I did, my lord. I am sworn to deliver a message to you from her."

"What message?"

"She wished me to tell you that her last thoughts were of you. She wished me to tell you that while her life was short, it was made happy by the time she spent with you."

She saw the tears streaming down my cheeks, and said, "Forgive me if my words cause you pain, my lord."

"There is nothing to forgive, child. Would that I had the means to pay you as much as this message is worth to me, because a lifetime of thanks would still leave me in your debt."

"Grief owes no debt," she said. "Peace be upon you, my lord."

"Peace be upon you," I said.

She left, and I wandered the streets for hours, crying tears of release. All the while I thought on the truth of Bashaarat's words: past and future are the same, and we cannot change either, only know them more fully. My journey to the past had changed nothing, but what I had learned had changed everything, and I understood that it could not have been otherwise. If our lives are tales that Allah tells, then we are the audience as well

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as the players, and it is by living these tales that we receive their lessons.

Night fell, and it was then that the city's guardsmen found me, wandering the streets after curfew in my dusty clothes, and asked who I was. I told them my name and where I lived, and the guardsmen brought me to my neighbors to see if they knew me, but they did not recognize me, and I was taken to jail.

I told the guard captain my story, and he found it entertaining, but did not credit it, for who would? Then I remembered some news from my time of grief twenty years before, and told him that Your Majesty's grandson would be born an albino. Some days later, word of the infant's condition reached the captain, and he brought me to the governor of the quarter. When the governor heard my story, he brought me here to the palace, and when your lord chamberlain heard my story, he in turn brought me here to the throne room, so that I might have the infinite privilege of recounting it to Your Majesty.

Now my tale has caught up to my life, coiled as they both are, and the direction they take next is for Your Majesty to decide. I know many things that will happen here in Baghdad over the next twenty years, but nothing about what awaits me now. I have no money for the journey back to Cairo and the Gate of Years there, yet I count myself fortunate beyond measure, for I was given the opportunity to revisit my past mistakes, and I have learned what remedies Allah allows. I would be honored to relate everything I know of the future, if Your Majesty sees fit to ask, but for myself, the most precious knowledge I possess is this:

Nothing erases the past. There is repentance, there is atonement, and there is forgiveness. That is all, but that is enough.

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CURIOSITIES

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RONALD Fraser (1888-1974) was a British civil servant, diplomat and writer. In 1917, following service in the First World War, Fraser joined the Foreign Trade Department of the Foreign Office. He was promoted rapidly, and during his long career served in places as various as Buenos Aires and Cairo. In 1949 he was knighted for his service.

Alongside his career in business, Fraser also wrote more than thirty books, published between 1924 and the year of his death. Twenty-seven are novels, and many of these are fantasies with mystical themes, showing the reality hidden behind our prosaic everyday world.

Flower Phantoms was Fraser's third novel, and it remains one of his most memorable. The minimal plot centers around Judy, a botanical student who works at Kew Gardens. She lives nearby with her businessman brother Hubert, and the story contrasts her faltering courtship by Roland, a professor of literary history, with her imaginative life among the plants and flowers, and her visions of and strange experiences with the embodied imaginations of the flowers in their native plant-world. The Water Lily tells her the cold truth of its world, while her encounter with the poetic Orchid seethes with a lyrical sensuality. Eventually Judy's inner and outer worlds collide, and from them art — in the form of her own imaginative paintings — is born.

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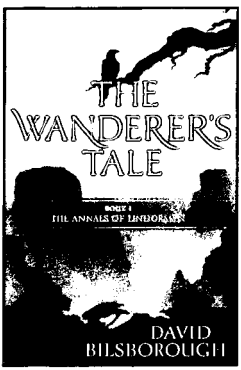

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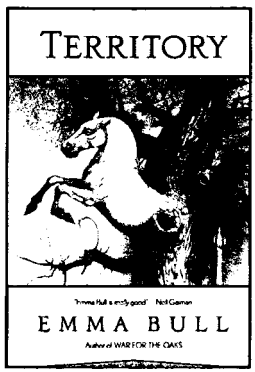

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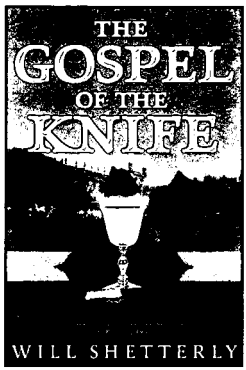

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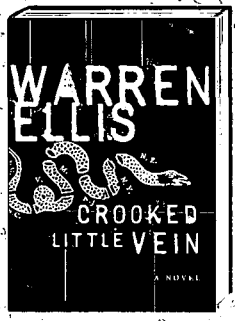

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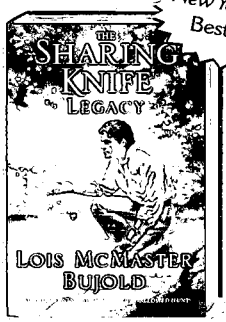

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